



Department
for Environment,
Food & Rural Affairs



Llywodraeth Cymru
Welsh Government

Proposed Fisheries Management Plan for Irish Sea Demersal for Northern Irish, English and Welsh waters

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Abbreviations

AFBI- Agri-Food Bioscience Institute

B_{lim} - Biomass Limit Reference Point

B_{pa} - Precautionary Reference Point for Spawning Stock Biomass (SSB)

B_{trigger} - Biomass Trigger Reference Point

CEFAS – Centre for Environment, Fisheries and Aquaculture Science

EU - European Union

FMP – Fisheries Management Plan

F_{MSY} - Fishing pressure that results in Maximum Sustainable Yield

GES – Good Environmental Status

ICES – International Council for the Exploration of the Sea

JFS – Joint Fisheries Statement

JNCC – Joint Nature Conservation Committee

MCRS - Minimum Conservation Reference Size

MMO – Marine Management Organisation

MAPs – Multi Annual Plans

MPAs - Marine Protected Areas

MSY – Maximum Sustainable Yield

PMFs – Priority Marine Features

ROI – Republic of Ireland

SNCB – Statutory Nature Conservation Bodies

SSB – Spawning Stock Biomass

TAC – Total Allowable Catch

The Act – the Fisheries Act 2020

Executive Summary

This Fisheries Management Plan (referred to as “the FMP”), for the Demersal fisheries in the Irish Sea, is one of 43 FMPs set out in the [Joint Fisheries Statement \(JFS\)](#). This joint FMP has been developed by the Department of Agriculture, Environment and Rural Affairs (DAERA), the Department for Environment, Food and Rural Affairs (Defra) and the Welsh Government.

This FMP sets out the policies to contribute to the sustainable management of demersal fisheries catching *Nephrops*, cod, haddock, whiting, sole and plaice within the Northern Irish, Welsh and English waters of ICES Division 7.a. This excludes the territorial waters of Scotland and Isle of Man. In its development, advice and comment has been sought from industry, scientists, regulators, statutory nature conservation bodies (SNCBs) and stakeholders.

The FMP covers 7 stocks¹, all of which are managed with the European Union and caught in mixed demersal fisheries in the Irish Sea. The fishing opportunities are managed by the setting of Total Allowable Catches (TACs). These and other agreed management measures are set following international negotiation in accordance with the provisions of the Trade and Cooperation Agreement between the EU and the UK (TCA), guided by the best available scientific advice, whilst also balancing environmental, social and economic factors. The principles followed by the UK in relation to international fisheries negotiations are laid out in the JFS under section 4.2.

With the exception of haddock, there is sufficient scientific evidence for the fisheries policy authorities to make maximum sustainable yield (MSY) assessments. The evidence available for haddock is currently under review. Not all these stocks are currently fished within the MSY limits. This FMP seeks to provide an approach to deliver sustainable exploitation of the demersal stocks, balancing long term environmentally sustainable fishing alongside economic, social and employment benefits.

The key focus of this FMP is to:

- contribute to maintaining the sole stock at a sustainable level.
- contribute to the restoration and maintenance of the whiting, cod, haddock, plaice and *nephrops* stocks to sustainable levels where possible, including considering the need for additional safeguards to protect *Nephrops* (FU 14 and 15).

¹ *Nephrops* is considered as two functional units for stock assessment purposes within the Irish Sea (ICES Division 7a).

A species is a group of organisms that can interbreed to produce fertile offspring. A fish stock is a population of fish of the same species that lives in a specific geographic area. A fishery can refer to the part of a stock which is targeted for capture in a particular geographic area or by a particular fishing method.

What is a Fisheries Management Plan (FMP)?

An FMP is a document prepared and published under the Fisheries Act 2020, referred to as “the Act”, that sets out policies designed to restore one or more stocks of sea fish to, or maintain them at, sustainable levels or contribute to their restoration or maintenance at sustainable levels. It is an evidence-based action plan that supports delivery of sustainable fisheries for current and future generations.

The FMP is a long-term plan that must be reviewed and, if necessary, revised at least once every six years. It sets out both a longer-term vision and goals for the fishery (or fisheries), together with the policies, monitoring and management interventions necessary to achieve these goals in the shorter term.

Why an FMP for Irish Sea Demersal?

The Joint Fisheries Statement (JFS²) sets out the criteria to determine which stocks should be included in FMPs.

The Irish Sea demersal fisheries are of significant economic and social importance to the bordering coastal communities. While the directed *Nephrops* fishery is the largest in terms of fleet and landings, the species covered in this FMP, *Nephrops*, cod, haddock, whiting, sole and plaice are all caught together in various demersal fisheries.

The stocks have different conservation requirements and technical conservation measures have been widely used to try and address unwanted catches. The stocks included in this FMP are the main species, caught within the Irish Sea by demersal fishing activity as a targeted species or an associated bycatch. Not all species caught in the demersal fisheries are considered, this FMP focuses on those which were historically targeted, of potentially high economic value, or are an unwanted catch and may contribute to a discard or conservation concern.

In addition, this FMP considers policies in relation to ongoing socio-economic and environmental issues for Irish Sea fisheries including marine spatial planning (spatial squeeze) and ecosystem interactions.

By clearly setting out the policies the national fisheries policy authorities will follow, it is intended to give all sections of the fishing industry, fishers, processors consumers reassurance over the long-term sustainable management of the resource.

² Point 5.3.2 [Joint Fisheries Statement \(JFS\)](https://www.gov.uk/government/uploads/system/uploads/attachment_data/file/674442/jfs-2020-2024.pdf) - GOV.UK (www.gov.uk)

Stakeholder Engagement

The FMP has been developed collaboratively between three UK Administrations - the Department of Agriculture, Environment and Rural Affairs (DAERA), the Department for Environment, Food & Rural Affairs (Defra) and Welsh Government alongside engagement with national fishing organisations and stakeholder groups.

A working group of key stakeholders met regularly between 2023 and 2025 to help inform and shape the content of this FMP. This group was known as the Irish Sea Demersal FMP Working Group and was made up of demersal fishing industry representatives, relevant fishing administrations, fisheries scientists, and eNGOs (environmental Non-Governmental Organisations). The Group provided comment on the proposed goals and provided input in collaboration with key stakeholders. In addition, separate bilateral meetings took place over several months to gather additional views and input during the pre-consultation phase.

Output from the Irish Sea Demersal FMP Working Group was reviewed by the NI FMP Advisory Group, again consisting of stakeholders with oversight over all DAERA led FMPs. Input was also provided through the UK level FMP Working Group (FMPWG) which is made up of representatives of the four UK Fisheries Authorities (Defra, and the devolved governments in Northern Ireland, Scotland and Wales).

Feedback received as part of the formal public consultation will also shape the final FMP.

Vision

The vision of the FMP is to progress long-term sustainable management of the key demersal fisheries in the Irish Sea to maintain or recover stocks to sustainable levels.

As per the Act's sustainability, ecosystem and climate change objectives, this is being taken to mean that the management of the fisheries exploiting those stocks identified by the FMP is "environmentally sustainable in the long term and managed to achieve economic, social and employment benefits³", taking into account interaction with other fish stocks, and minimising where possible any adverse effects of fishing activities on marine ecosystems and climate change.

Policy Goals

Where there is sufficient available scientific evidence to assess MSY, the FMP must contain policies which at least contribute to restoring or maintaining the stocks at MSY. For stocks where MSY cannot be measured, an FMP must contain policies for

³ As per the sustainability objective of the Act.

maintaining or increasing stock levels and specify the steps needed to obtain the evidence for an MSY assessment.

To ensure effective management of these demersal fisheries, the FMP identifies six policy goals (detailed below) focused on the domestic and international management priorities. These goals will be informed by public consultation and will be prioritised appropriately to ensure realistic and measurable outputs. They were drafted to meet the requirements of section 6(3)(a) and (b) of the Act (goals 1, 2) and policies set out in the JFS (policies 3, 4, 5 and 6). For each policy goal, the plan sets out:

- a rationale;
- appropriate ongoing, short and/or longer-term actions;
- how the actions support delivery of the fisheries objectives.

The policy goals are:

- Policy Goal 1: Harvest the stock of sole sustainably, at a level commensurate with Maximum Sustainable Yield.
- Policy Goal 2: Harvest stocks of cod, whiting, haddock, plaice and Nephrops sustainably, contributing to restoring and maintaining the biomass above the level capable of producing MSY.
- Policy Goal 3: Support evaluation of the impact on fish stocks and fishing fleets from other developments impacting upon marine habitats.
- Policy Goal 4: Support ecosystem-based sustainable management by minimising the impact of Irish Sea demersal fisheries on the marine ecosystem.
- Policy Goal 5: Support progress towards sustainable fishing by maximising any economic and social benefit.
- Policy Goal 6: Minimise the impact of fish activities on climate change and support the fishing industry to adapt to climate change.

Performance indicators for the FMP are addressed in the Monitoring section.

Scope and Purpose

This FMP sets out the policies to contribute to the sustainable management of the identified stocks within Northern Irish, English and Welsh waters of ICES Division 7.a, and the demersal fisheries operated on these stocks. This excludes the territorial waters of Scotland and the Isle of Man.

The 2020 Act requires the relevant authority or authorities to prepare and publish FMPs in accordance with the list and timetable included in the JFS.⁴ The relevant authorities for this FMP are DAERA, Defra and the Welsh Government.

This FMP has been prepared and published by the relevant authorities for the purposes of the Act, in accordance with the policies and proposals in the JFS.

Background

Location

The Irish Sea, ICES⁵ Division 7.a, is a relatively enclosed sea basin situated between Ireland/Northern Ireland and Great Britain. It is connected to the Celtic Sea (7.g) in the south by St George's Channel, and in the north, it is linked to the West of Scotland (6.a) by the Northern Channel.

This FMP applies to the Northern Irish, Welsh and English Waters of ICES Division 7.a. It does not include the territorial waters of Scotland (the Scottish Zone), the Isle of Man or the Republic of Ireland (EU EEZ). It does not include the waters or fisheries within Strangford Lough.

⁴ UK Government (2022) [Joint Fisheries Statement](#). The updated timetables are set out in the [updated Annex A](#) (amended December 2024)

⁵ International Committee for the Exploration of the Sea.

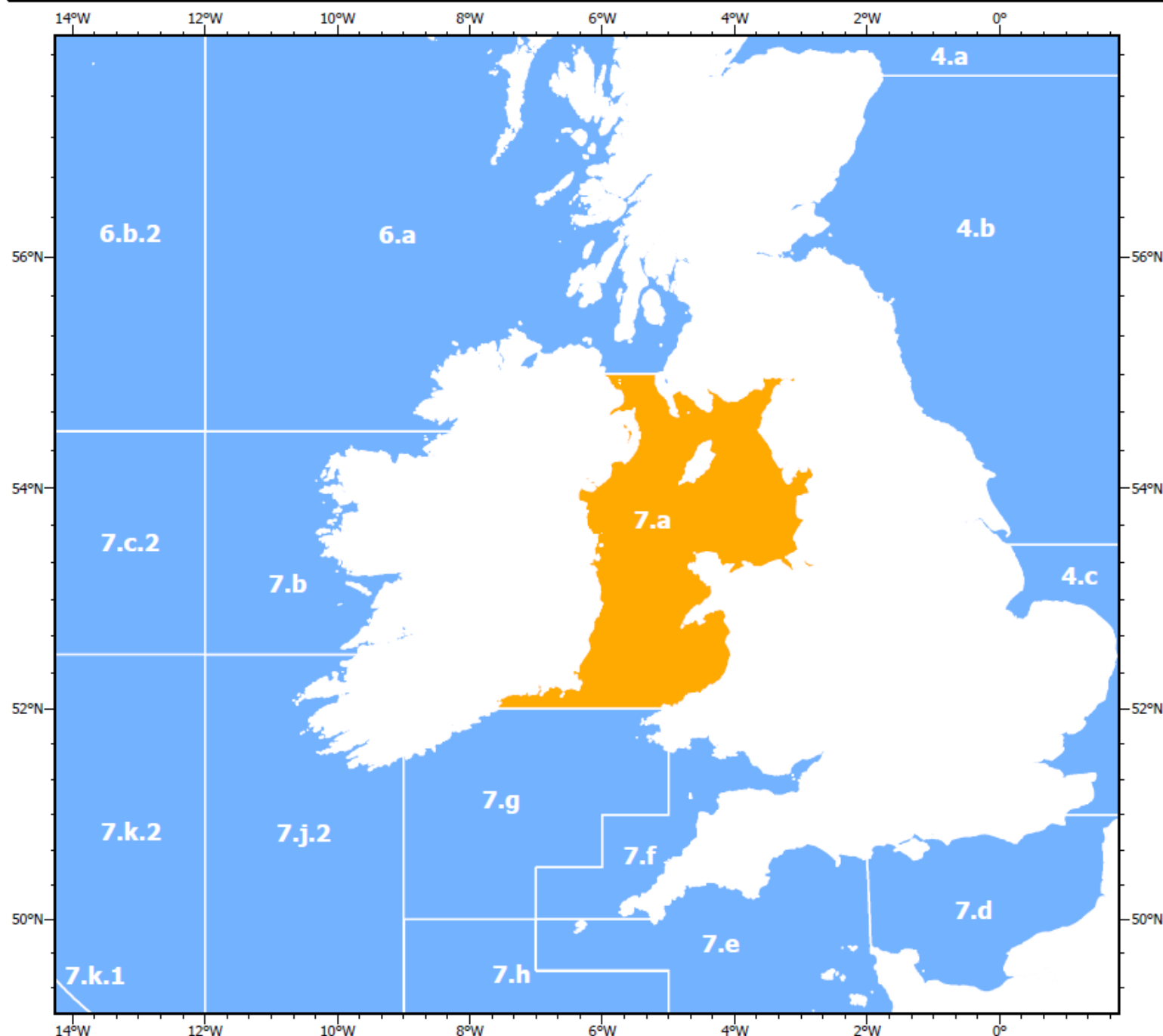
Fig.1 International Council for the Exploration of the Sea (ICES) Subarea 7.a



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ICES Areas

- ICES 7.a Area
- ICES Areas



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Date of Publication: 05/06/2026

Coordinate System: WGS 1984 Web Mercator (Auxiliary Sphere)

Projection: Mercator (Auxiliary Sphere)

DAERA Reference: Marine_Data_and_Evidence\Fisheries Management

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Source data: International Council for the Exploration of the Sea, ICES spatial framework data.

Basemap: Esri, TomTom, FAO, NOAA, USGS

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Fig. 2 The Irish Sea Demersal Fisheries Management Plan Area



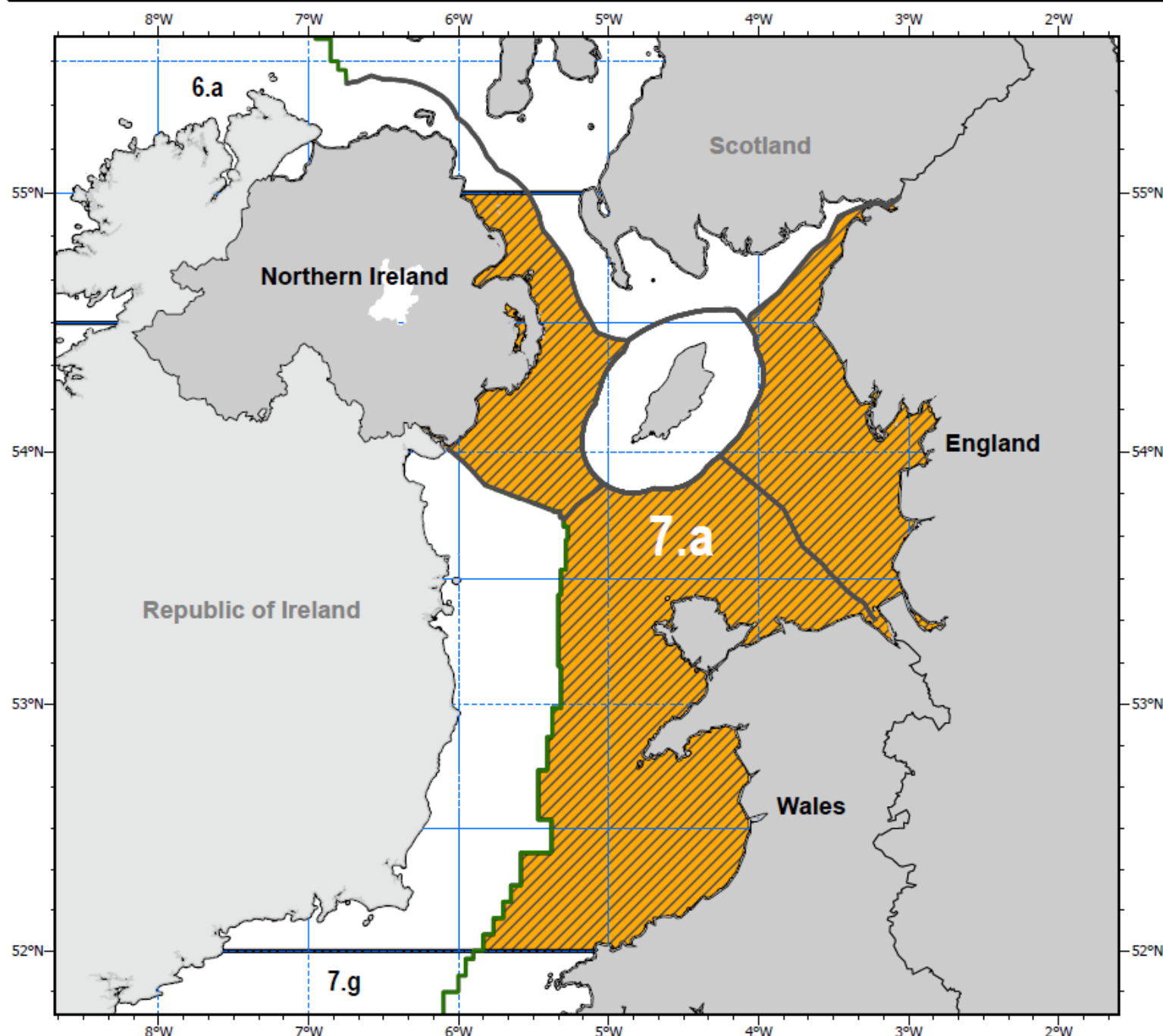
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Boundaires

- Maritime Boundaries and Limits
- UK Exclusive Economic Zone Limit
- ▭ ICES Areas
- ▨ FMP Area
- - - ICES Statistical Rectangles



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Stocks covered in this FMP

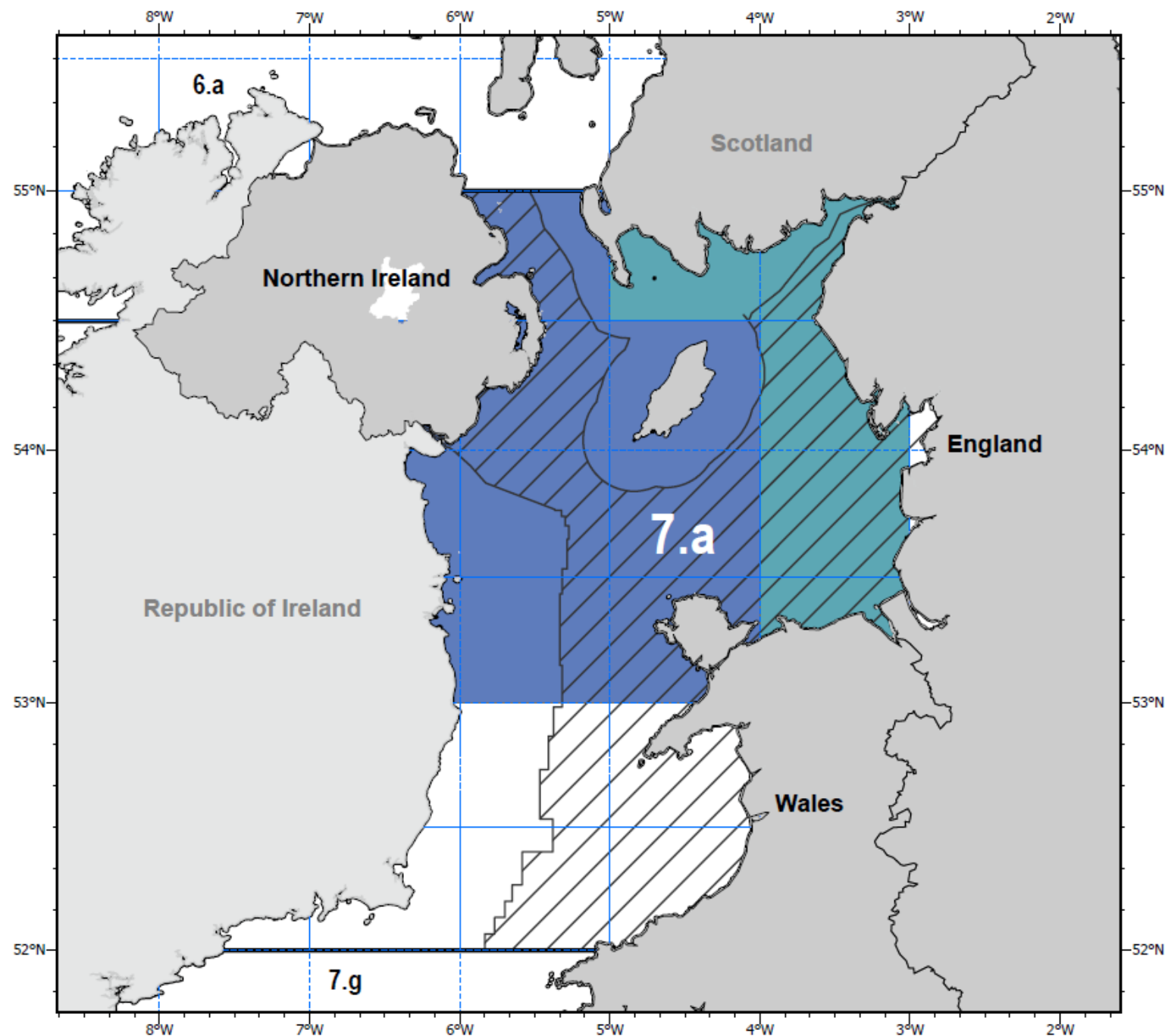
This plan deals with the following stocks, which ICES describe and assess as being within the boundaries of the Irish Sea, Division 7.a⁶.

- Haddock (*Melanogrammus aeglefinus*) in Division 7.a (Irish Sea) (had.27.7.a)
- Cod (*Gadus morhua*) in Division 7.a (Irish Sea) (cod.27.7.a)
- Whiting (*Merlangius merlangus*) in Division 7.a (Irish Sea) (whg.27.7.a)
- Plaice (*Pleuronectes platessa*) in Division 7.a (Irish Sea) (ple.27.7.a)
- Sole (*Solea solea*) in Division 7.a (Irish Sea) (Sol.27.7.a)
- Norway lobster (*Nephrops norvegicus*) in Division 7.a, Functional Unit 14 (Irish Sea East) and 15 (Irish Sea, West) - referred to as *Nephrops*. (Nep.fu.14 and Nep.fu.15)

The stocks cod, whiting, sole, plaice and haddock are distributed across the Irish Sea. *Nephrops* stocks are associated with areas of benthic mud habitat of which there are two main areas within the Irish Sea. ICES assess *Nephrops* in a number of discrete units, which have limited connectivity. These are designated by ICES as Functional Units (FU), with FU 14 and 15 relevant to the Irish Sea (Figure 3).

⁶ Noting that ICES attribute cod, whiting and haddock within ICES statistical rectangles 33E2, 33E3 to the Celtic Sea stocks.

Fig.3 ICES Nephrops Functional Units in Subarea 7.a



Boundaries

-  FMP Area
-  ICES Areas
-  ICES Statistical Rectangles

Nephrops Functional Units

Grounds

-  Irish Sea, East (FU14)
-  Irish Sea, West (FU15)



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Figure 4 below demonstrates the extent of the mud habitat within each of these FU areas. While there may be a small amount of fishing outside these areas this effectively defines the physical boundaries of the targeted *Nephrops* fishery.

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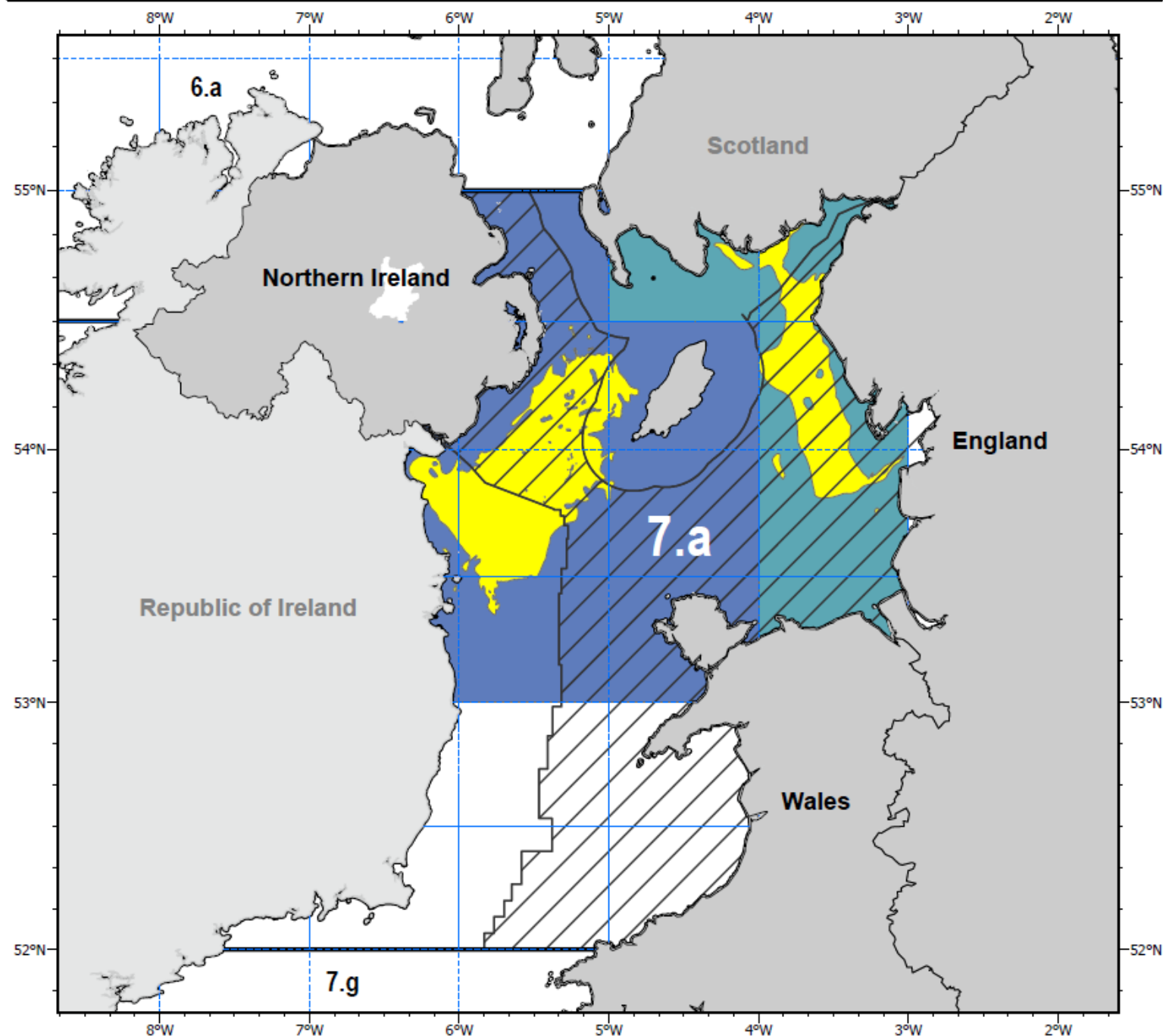
Fig.4 Nephrops Grounds and Functional Units in Subarea 7.a



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Boundaries

- FMP Area
- ICES Areas
- ICES Statistical Rectangles

Nephrops

- Irish Sea, East (FU14)
- Irish Sea, West (FU15)
- Nephrops Grounds



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Stock Overviews

Irish Sea Cod – *Gadus morhua*

ICES stock code: cod.27.7.a

Stock area: Division 27.7.a, (excluding the rectangles 33E2 and 33E3)

Irish sea cod has experienced a strong decline since the early 1990s, associated with impaired stock recruitment. The stock has been managed under the cod conservation measures since 2000, which include setting of a small allowable catch limit to cover unavoidable bycatches, an exclusion zone during spawning season, as well as technical measures (see section.4).

Fishing pressure on the stock is low (below F_{MSY}), and at present there is no targeted commercial cod fishing permitted in the Irish Sea. Landings of cod caught as bycatch of other fisheries is permitted, and these occur mainly in other finfish and *Nephrops* directed fisheries (ca. 91t in 2024 - landings and discards). There is a recreational fishery for cod, for which total catches are as yet uncertain but is considered by ICES to have only a minor effect on the advice.

The Irish Sea is considered to be at the upper temperature limit for cod, and there has been a reduction in productivity of Irish Sea cod since the 1990s coinciding with sea temperature rise ([Bentley et al., 2021⁷](#)) There are two main spawning grounds for Irish Sea cod, located in the Eastern and Western Irish Sea. Annual surveys are conducted to monitor trends in egg and larval numbers, and these have been extremely low in recent years.

Irish Sea cod have a truncated age structure paired with fast growth, which are considered characteristics of relatively short-lived stocks. Adults are usually found in deeper, colder waters. During the day they form schools and swim about 30-80 m above the bottom, dispersing at night to feed. They are omnivorous, feeding at dawn or dusk on invertebrates and fish, including their own young (Cohen et al. 1990⁸).

Adults migrate between spawning, feeding and overwintering areas, and recent tagging and microchemistry studies have shown migrations of Irish Sea cod between adjacent stock areas (ICES Divisions 6a and 7g). The frequency of these movements and the underlying drivers are not fully understood.

⁸ Cohen, D., T. Inada, T. Iwamoto and N. Scialabba 1990. "FAO species catalogue. Vol. 10. Gadiform fishes of the world (Order Gadiformes). An annotated and illustrated catalogue of cods, hakes, grenadiers and other gadiform fishes known to data." FAO Fisheries Synopsis(125): 452

This stock is assessed by ICES using an age-based category 1 assessment and scientific advice follows the MSY approach. This assessment incorporates information from a range of sources including the Northern Ireland Groundfish Survey Q1 and Q4 surveys (AFBI⁹), a Fishery Science Partnership Survey UKFSP (AFBI & Industry partners) and commercial catch data. Based on the 2025 assessment, spawning stock biomass (SSB) is considered to be below B_{lim} , and fishing pressure (F) below F_{MSY}

Irish Sea Haddock - *Melanogrammus aeglefinus*

ICES stock code: had.27.7.a

Stock area: Division 27.7.a, (excluding the rectangles 33E2 and 33E3)

Irish Sea haddock increased strongly from the mid-2010s to 2018, following high recruitment in 2013 and 2015. Since 2020, stock size has declined, linked with low recruitment years in 2020, 2022 and 2023. Haddock stocks are often characterised by sporadic high recruitment even at low spawning-stock levels, and similar periods of low recruitment have been previously observed. Despite recent declines, in the ICES advice for 2025 haddock SSB remained above reference points ($B_{trigger}$, B_{pa} , and B_{lim}), and fishing pressure on this stock had been below F_{MSY} since 2013. The haddock assessment incorporates information from a range of sources including the Northern Ireland Groundfish Survey Q1 and Q4 surveys (AFBI), a Fishery Science Partnership Survey UKFSP (AFBI & Industry partners) and commercial catch data.

Until 2025, this stock had been assessed by ICES using an age-based category 1 assessment¹⁰ following the MSY approach. Discrepancies in the assessment input data for the 2026 assessment were identified. There was insufficient time for ICES to complete a revised quality assured advice, instead the advice was downgraded from category 1 to category 5.

This category 5 advice, released in November 2025, applied a precautionary approach to the average catches from 2022 to 2024. ICES could not assess the stock and exploitation status relative to MSY or precautionary approach (PA) reference points because of evidence gaps in the data, including concerns over survey coverage and changing fishing patterns.

A full benchmark assessment for Irish Sea haddock is planned by ICES for the 2027–2028 benchmark cycle. The revised assessment is expected to underpin the advice from 2029 onwards.

Irish Sea haddock management is currently based on Total Allowable Catch (TAC), following ICES scientific advice on catches. However, in recent years catches of

⁹ Agri-Food Biosciences Institute- scientific advisor to DAERA

¹⁰ Age Structures Assessment Programme

haddock have been consistently below agreed TACs, due to economic factors, (quality and value). The highly selective gears, effort controls and spatial management introduced to reduce fishing pressure on cod and whiting, are considered to have some positive selectivity outcomes for the Irish Sea haddock fishery. An area closure is in place in the Western Irish Sea from the 15th of February to the 30th of April to coincide with the main spawning period of Irish Sea cod. Derogations for the haddock fishery are made; however, these are dependent on additional controls to limit cod bycatch. (see Technical Conservation Measures section).

The Irish Sea haddock stock is mainly distributed in the west and south of the Isle of Man, preferring the coarser seabed sediments, around the periphery of the muddy *Nephrops* grounds, usually at temperatures between 4° and 10°C. Spawning occurs between February and May in the Irish Sea, with the main spawning area in the western Irish sea. Egg and larval surveys are conducted annually to monitor trends in egg and larval numbers recruitment, alongside spring and autumn surveys of adult fish. The young larvae and juveniles feed on copepods and nauplii species before advancing to crustacea ([Rowlands et al. 2008](#)). Adults feed mainly on small bottom-living organisms including crustaceans, molluscs, echinoderms, worms and fish.

Nephrops (Functional Units 14 and 15) - *Nephrops norvegicus*

ICES stock code: nep.fu.14 and nep.fu.15

Stock area: Functional Unit 15 – Irish Sea West and Functional Unit 14 – Irish Sea East.

The *Nephrops* fishery in the Irish Sea is primarily focused on two large areas of *Nephrops* mud habitat in the northwestern (FU15 - Irish Sea West) and eastern Irish Sea (FU14 - Irish Sea East) See Figure 4. The Irish Sea fishery is primarily focused on the northwestern Irish Sea, with > 90% of all landings caught in FU 15. A smaller proportion of landings are caught in the eastern Irish Sea (FU 14), and landings outside of these two FUs contribute <1% to landings by all fleets of *Nephrops* in ICES Division 7.a.

Nephrops abundance in both FUs is assessed based on underwater camera footage, from which *Nephrops* burrows are counted annually in July/August. Previously, *Nephrops* abundance in FU15 was relatively stable and above ICES biomass reference points across the assessment time-period (2003-2022) but is now below the $B_{trigger}$ biomass reference point. In FU14, *Nephrops* abundance has declined since 2022 and is below the $B_{trigger}$ biomass reference point. Fishing pressure in both FUs is below F_{MSY} .

At the time of drafting there are concerns over the recent advice for FU15, the 2026 assessment will as a matter of course review any quality concerns.

Despite assessment and advice being at the FU level, a single TAC for *Nephrops* is issued for Subarea 27.7. To ensure that *Nephrops* stocks are harvested sustainably, ICES recommends that management should be at the FU level. *Nephrops* are caught as part of a mixed fishery with demersal fish, and as such, technical measures for other stocks, such as the Irish Sea Conservation Measures¹¹ also impact on this fishery.

Nephrops are limited to muddy habitat and require sediment with a silt & clay content of between 10–100% to excavate its burrows, and this means that the distribution of suitable sediment determines the species distribution. Adult *Nephrops* only undertake very small-scale movements (a few 100 m), but larval transfer may occur between separate mud patches in some areas. *Nephrops* are mainly nocturnal and feed on detritus, crustaceans and worms. The typical life span of *N. norvegicus* is 5–10 years, reaching 15 years in exceptional cases. Egg-laying takes place in late summer or early autumn.

After spawning, the berried (egg-carrying) females remain in their burrows until the end of the incubation period. Hatching takes place in late winter or early spring. Compared to other *Nephrops* functional units in Subarea 7 the population density of the western Irish sea (FU15) was previously the highest of all stocks. This is linked with high larval production and a strong retention mechanism due to the western Irish Sea gyre (Hill et al. 1996). There is little scientific evidence of mixing between the east and west Irish Sea stocks due to the nature of water current movements, and these are considered separate populations.

Irish Sea Plaice – *Pleuronectes platessa*

ICES stock code: ple.27.7.a

Stock area: Division 27.7.a

After a peak in the mid-2010s, Irish Sea plaice biomass declined steeply as a result of poor recruitment from 2015. Following a significant decline in the last 5 years, plaice SSB is now estimated to be below MSY $B_{trigger}$ and between B_{pa} and B_{lim} and fishing pressure on this stock has been below F_{MSY} since 2008 but has increased recently to just below F_{MSY} . ICES estimated total catches of plaice in the various fisheries have been considerably below the agreed TACs since 2018. ICES estimate that total discards represent 70% of total catches (average, 2020-2024).

Plaice is primarily caught as a non-target bycatch within sole fisheries in the Irish Sea, with most being discarded (on average 61% between 2004-2023). Plaice discard

¹¹ Applied via licence condition or as result of assimilated EU Regulation 2019/2239

survival is estimated to be 40% ([Catchpole et al. 2015](#)), and a *de minimis* exemption for discarding at sea exists for this stock.

The stock of plaice in the Irish Sea is considered to have 3 main spawning areas in the Irish Sea, near the Irish coast, northeast of the Isle of Man towards the Cumbrian coast, and a third off the North Wales coast ([Fox et al., 1997](#)). Further smaller additional spawning has also been identified in Cardigan Bay off the Welsh coast. Irish Sea plaice spawning begins in December, peaks between mid-February and mid-March with egg production ceasing by the end of April (Fox et al. 2009).

Although assessed as separate stocks, tagging studies indicate that plaice stocks in the Irish Sea and the Celtic Sea mix during spawning (Dunn and Pawson, 2002; [Fox et al. 2009](#)). Adult plaice live on mixed sediments, mud and sand, with older fish in deeper waters; small individuals are observed in sandy sediments in shallow inshore bays (Frimodt, 1995).

ICES provide an age-based category 1 assessment¹², with advice based on the MSY approach. This assessment incorporates information from a range of sources including the UK Beam Trawl Survey (CEFAS) and the Northern Ireland Groundfish Surveys Q1 and Q4 (AFBI) and commercial catch data.

Irish Sea Sole - *Solea solea*

ICES stock code: sol.27.7.a

Stock area: Division 27.7.a

Irish Sea sole has increased following a low period between the mid-2000s and 2017 and is now above all biomass reference points (MSY $B_{trigger}$, B_{pa} , and B_{lim}) based on the most recent ICES assessment ([2025](#)). Fishing pressure (F) is below F_{MSY} . Fishing for this stock has increased markedly since 2018, following increases in stock abundance and correspondingly higher ICES advice.

Sole fishing is managed by TAC and technical measures. Fishing on this stock is primarily conducted by Belgian beam trawl vessels (86% of landings in 2024). A range of technical gear measures are in place, most notably the obligation on Belgian beam trawlers with a mesh size of 80–119 mm to use the 'Flemish Panel' to increase selectivity.

¹² State-Space Assessment Model

There is also a *de minimis* exemption in place which allows for discarding of undersized sole in Division 7.a. Recent ICES assessments indicate that there has been misreporting of catches between this stock and adjacent areas by some fleets.

Sole occurs throughout the Irish Sea, being more abundant in depths less than 60 m. Spawning takes place in shallow coastal waters, and juveniles are found during the first 2 to 3 years in coastal bays and nurseries before migrating to deeper waters. Adults are usually solitary and partially bury themselves in sand or mud during the day. Adults feed on worms, molluscs and small crustaceans. Reproduction starts after 3-5 years of age, when the fish are 25-30cm long. Tagging and genetic studies of sole in the Irish Sea and Bristol Channel show mainly local recruitment and limited movement outside of the management areas ([Horwood, 1993](#)).

ICES assessment uses a landings-based age-structured category 1 assessment¹³, advice follows the MSY approach. This assessment incorporates information from a range of sources including the UK Beam Trawl Q3 Survey (CEFAS), one commercial biomass index and commercial landings and catch data.

Irish Sea Whiting – *Merlangius merlangus*

ICES stock code: whg.27.7.a

Stock area: Division 27.7.a, (excluding the rectangles 33E2 and 33E3)

Irish Sea whiting declined steeply in the 1980s and 1990s, and SSB has been below MSY $B_{trigger}$, B_{pa} and B_{lim} since the mid 1990s. Fishing pressure is estimated to be above F_{MSY} and F_{pa} . Catch advice for Irish Sea whiting was zero-catch between 2001 and 2025. The ICES benchmark of the stock in 2025¹⁴ led to a change in assessment method and new reference points for this stock.

There is no targeted commercial whiting fishery permitted in the Irish Sea. Whiting is mainly caught as bycatch in mixed fisheries primarily targeting Nephrops. A small proportion of whiting bycatch is observed in pelagic fisheries. The majority of whiting catch is below minimum conservation reference size (MCRS), or of minimal economic value and widely discarded within the Nephrops fishery.

Since 2022, ICES have published annual mixed fishery considerations which integrate single-stock advice with fleet-level models to account for species caught together within mixed fisheries. The projections can be used when setting TACs, for example to prevent overfishing of vulnerable bycatch stocks such as whiting or prevent “choke”

¹³ State-Space Assessment Model

¹⁴ [Benchmark Workshop on Selected North Sea and Celtic Sea Stocks \(WKBNSCS\) - International Council for the Exploration of the Sea](#)

situations where one quota limits others. ICES did not provide mixed fishery considerations for 2026 due to an issue with the Irish Sea haddock assessment. Technical measures in place as part of Irish Sea Conservation Measures, are also likely to impact positively to some extent on discard levels of whiting.

Irish Sea whiting is widely distributed across the Irish Sea, mainly on mud and gravel bottoms, but also on sand and rock, from 30m to 100m. Whiting spawn in spring throughout the eastern Irish Sea and in the coastal waters of the western Irish Sea. This is monitored through annual egg and larva surveys, and data supported by the distribution of actively spawning fish caught during trawl surveys in March.

Whiting become demersal from late summer onwards, when they are found throughout the western Irish Sea although densities appear highest around the periphery of the mud patch in coastal waters and along the southern boundary between Ireland and the Isle of Man. Whiting have a broad diet which includes shrimps, crabs, molluscs, small fish, polychaetes and cephalopods.

This stock was assessed by ICES in 2025 as category 1, using age based analytical assessment, and the advice follows the MSY approach. This assessment incorporates information from a range of sources including the Northern Ireland Groundfish Survey Q1 and Q4 surveys (AFBI), a spring egg and larval survey and commercial catch data.

Extent of the FMP and fisheries

The geographic extent of this FMP does not match the geographical distribution of the stocks. The stocks are present (and fished) within other jurisdictional boundaries (e.g. within the waters of the Republic of Ireland, Scotland and the Isle of Man). The fisheries that target these demersal stocks (and their associated bycatch) can operate with some limitations across these jurisdictional boundaries.

While FMPs are required to address stock sustainability at the stock level, for this FMP we can only directly manage fishing activity within the area covered by the FMP. This has to be recognised in the development of any action, and it is possible that any action's effectiveness will be impacted by activity on the stock outside the remit of this plan.

Transboundary Issues

ICES 7.a also includes Isle of Man and Republic of Ireland waters hence the 6 species within this plan are considered shared stocks. These areas are under different legislative jurisdictions, and vessels are increasingly subject to different control regimes, including gear types, licensing and reporting requirements, including the need to have REM.

Access to Isle of Man waters

The access of British fishing boats to the territorial sea of the Isle of Man is subject to an Isle of Man sea-fishing licence, granted by the Department of Environment, Food and Agriculture, DEFA (Isle of Man Government). Fishing opportunities (such as catch quota) which are utilised in the territorial sea of the Isle of Man are counted towards uptake of UK fishing opportunities.

Fishing activity which is undertaken in the Isle of Man territorial sea is subject to the conditions of an Isle of Man Sea fishing licence, and legislation made under the Fisheries Act 2012 (of Tynwald). Specific technical conservation measures apply in the Isle of Man territorial sea under the Sea-Fisheries (Technical Measures) Byelaws 2000, again made under the Fisheries Act 2012.

For further detail on access and management arrangements between the UK and the Isle of Man, please refer to the Memorandum of Understanding [Isle of Man Government - IoM-UK Fisheries Management Memorandum of Understanding \(MoU\)](#)

Republic of Ireland

The Republic of Ireland (ROI) is a member of the European Union (EU). There is reciprocal access to some areas within each other's territorial waters in the Irish Sea. Under the TCA, EU vessels fishing in UK waters must comply with UK measures, and likewise UK vessels fishing in EU waters must comply with EU measures.

Historically Northern Ireland and the Republic of Ireland have a mutual access arrangement where they can fish in each other's 0-6 nm zones, this was known as the Voisinage (neighbourhood) arrangement. In 2019 an Irish Bill made this arrangement part of the ROI statute.

Fisheries

Catch Statistics

The UK Fishing industry statistics are published by the MMO each year (September) for the previous year. This provides recent information on catches, the gears in use, location of capture (inside and outside UK territorial waters) and activity of other nations' vessels fishing in UK waters.

The landing figures give a picture on the stocks targeted by the fishery, but do not report discards in that fishery or discards of the target species in other fisheries. For example, high percentages of plaice and whiting are discarded relative to landings. A breakdown of discards by main fishery types are presented in ICES advice.

The most recent MMO sea fishing statistics report can be found here: [UK sea fisheries annual statistics](#)). In addition, data on catches is maintained by UK Gov. Analysis of catches from 2019-2024 has been used below to identify the species caught by demersal fishing gears.

DRAFT

Gear Category	Species (tonnes)						Percentage by gear type
	Cod	Haddock	Nephrops (Norway Lobster)	Plaice	Sole	Whiting	
Beam trawls	6.14	4.70	0.93	26.39	168.52	0.66	<1%
Boat dredges	0.30	0.07	26.39	3.73	13.47	0.02	<1%
Drifting longlines				0.03	0.03		N/A
Driftnets				0.04	0.06	0.00	N/A
Gillnets (not specified)	0.73	0.00	0.02	2.91	3.62	0.03	<1%
Handlines and pole-lines (hand-operated)	0.02			0.01	0.98		N/A
Hooks and lines (not specified)	0.15			0.19	0.34	0.06	N/A
Longlines (not specified)	0.00			0.17	0.01		N/A
Miscellaneous gear			0.08		0.00		N/A
Nephrops trawls	2.17	9.33	708.87	38.12	6.61	0.28	2.%
Otter trawls - bottom	356.64	2269.71	29921.43	214.58	98.78	37.64	87%
Otter trawls - midwater	121.37	1290.49	3.38	2.05	0.00	131.08	4%
Otter twin trawls	9.74	47.91	2160.97	1.23	4.73	0.27	6%
Pair trawls - midwater						79.90	<1%
Pots	0.17	0.00	97.44	0.31	0.05		<1%
Scottish seines		2.46		0.10		0.42	N/A
Set gillnets (anchored)	0.46			0.73	3.85	0.00	N/A
Set longlines	0.01		0.00		0.03		N/A
Trammel nets	0.20			0.02	0.29	0.00	N/A

Table 1: Total landings (tonnes) by gear type for UK vessels from 7.a (2019-2024) (N/A = <0.1%)

In the Welsh, English and Northern Ireland 7.a Area of UK Fishery limits, the main activity in the Irish Sea in terms of volume of catch and gear type is from the NI *Nephrops* fleet.

Nephrops catches (*Nephrops* trawls, Otter twin and bottom trawls) account for almost 95% by weight of landings in the Irish Sea. The NI fleet accounts for 96% of this catch and 65% by value of all landings from the Irish Sea. English registered vessels that record small drift net/fixed net with catches of plaice and sole utilise less than 2t a year, but there is significant uptake within the English/Welsh beam trawl vessels.

Country	Species (tonnes)
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	Cod	Haddock	Nephrops (Norway Lobster)	Plaice	Sole	Whiting
Belgium	11.87	8.11	0.12	179.00	465.12	4.31
Ireland	23.72	143.46	651.07	4.87	3.90	69.11
Isle of Man	0.18	0.20	51.59	3.17	1.54	1.02
UK - England	10.31	4.83	487.81	227.41	215.67	1.66
UK - Northern Ireland	483.95	3606.12	31906.47	56.36	72.46	247.21
UK - Scotland	3.38	13.68	475.61	0.64	10.23	0.45
UK - Wales	0.26	0.01	9.07	2.35	1.64	0.00
Grand Total	533.67	3776.40	33581.73	473.80	770.57	323.77
	Species (percentage of catch)					
Belgium	2%	<1%	0.00	38%	60%	1%
Ireland	5%	4%	2%	1%	<1%	21%
Isle of Man	<1%	<1%	<1%	<1%	<1%	<1%
UK - England	2%	<1%	1%	48%	28%	<1%
UK - Northern Ireland	91%	96%	95%	12%	9%	76%
UK - Scotland	<1%	<1%	1%	<1%	1%	<1%
UK - Wales	<0.1%	<0.1%	<0.1%	<1%	<1%	<0.1%
Belgium	2%	<1%	0.00	38%	60%	1%

Table 2: Total landings into the UK by species (weight and percentage by species) by country from 7.a (2019-2024)

Country	Species (tonnes)					
	Cod	Haddock	Nephrops (Norway Lobster)	Plaice	Sole	Whiting
Belgium	12.4	8.2	0.1	203.9	571.9	4.8
Ireland	74.7	1043.2	2224.9	55.0	113.7	167.5
United Kingdom	498.1	3624.7	32919.5	290.6	301.4	250.4
Grand Total	585.1	4676.1	35144.5	549.6	987.0	422.7
	Species (percentage of catch)					
Belgium	2%	0%	0%	37%	58%	1%
Ireland	13%	22%	6%	10%	12%	40%
United Kingdom	85%	78%	94%	53%	31%	59%

Table 3: Total landings by species (weight and percentage by species) by country from 7.a (2019-2024)

The largest uptake of sole is by the Belgian fleet (mainly beam trawls), with significant plaice catches. Ireland is active in the UK zone mainly targeting *Nephrops* and to lesser degree haddock. Irish fleets account for some 6% of *Nephrops* overall outtake (otter trawls and otter twin trawls). This activity is mainly concentrated on FU 15.

Demersal trawl and seine netting activity have both recently declined. There are some isolated but significant catches of whiting by pelagic gears (pair trawls mid water). Activity from Belgian beam trawl fleet, catching plaice and sole had declined prior to 2018 but is now increasing.

Economic evidence has been prepared by Seafish¹⁵, providing evidence on fleet characteristics, landings trends, key landing ports and economic significance of the Demersal fisheries. The report uses data collected by Seafish during Fleet Economic Surveys and uses the methodology described in the UK Economic Fleet Estimates and Fleet Enquiry Tool¹⁶. Full details of the methodology are in the report.

The *Nephrops* fleet, and associate landings are the main economic activity in the Irish Sea. The tables below are reproduced from the report.

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Species	2016	2017	2018	2019	2020	2021	2022
<i>Nephrops</i> (£m)	9.27	8.45	7.71	10.20	6.30	8.17	10.81
<i>Nephrops</i> (tonnes)	4,117	3,529	3,215	4,048	3,329	4,259	3,837
Cod (£m)	0.038	0.053	0.197	0.332	0.166	0.170	0.139
Cod (tonnes)	25	25	79	118	58	52	40
Whiting (£m)	0.0019	0.0064	0.0095	0.029	0.0337	0.0194	0.0127
Whiting (tonnes)	3	11	11	32	32	21	20
Haddock (£m)	0.508	0.959	1.21	0.940	0.412	0.524	0.372
Haddock (tonnes)	427	655	886	644	296	482	352
Sole (£m)	0.026	0.023	0.024	0.078	0.434	0.397	0.654
Sole (tonnes)	5	3	5	12	53	57	60
Plaice (£m)	0.0259	0.029	0.038	0.037	0.049	0.045	0.027
Plaice (tonnes)	40	49	52	45	59	56	27

Table 4. Landings by weight and value for species within scope of the FMP 2016-2022

¹⁵ Irish Sea Demersal FMP Evidence Summary – Seafish, available in additional material/annex

¹⁶ [UK Economic Fleet Estimates and Fleet Enquiry Tool -Methodology Report](#) —Seafish.

¹⁷ from SEAFISH :Irish Sea Demersal Fisheries Management Plan: Seafish Evidence Summary 2024

Values	2016	2017	2018	2019	2020	2021	2022
Fishing Income (£m)	9.87	9.52	9.18	11.6	7.39	9.33	12.0
GVA (£m)	5.36	4.94	4.91	6.54	4.81	4.55	4.71
Operational Profit (£m)	2.47	2.22	1.74	2.69	2.17	1.61	1.19
Net Profit (£m)	1.69	1.34	1.11	2.06	1.54	0.46	1.19
FTE	242	212	235	163	157	216	194

Table 5. Key economic performance indicators for fisheries relevant to the FMP 2016-2022

Gear Group	2016	2017	2018	2019	2020	2021	2022
Otter Trawls	4529.45	4182.61	4227.64	4880.91	3746.35	4767.87	4273.11
Beam Trawls	0.14	3.11	0.40	1.19	57.25	44.93	41.23
Pots	12.52	18.93	11.59	9.31	11.32	11.45	10.73
Dredges	1.76	3.08	2.34	6.38	11.04	0.42	7.57
Nets	4.37	10.41	5.31	1.11	1.28	2.15	2.22
Lines	0.04	0.49	0.65	0.24	0.08	0.16	1.01
Seines	68.25	44.56					
Other ¹⁹	0.06	0.03		0.07			
Annual Total	4616.58	4263.22	4247.94	4899.21	3827.33	4826.97	4335.88

Table 6. Key economic performance indicators in tonnes per gear group by year, for fisheries relevant to the FMP 2016 – 2022

Key points from the Seafish report:

- Otter trawls constitute the largest proportion of the fleet and are responsible for up to 98% of the landings, with a concentration of activity on the *Nephrops* habitat area. (ICES sub rectangles 37E4, 36E4).
- Beam trawl activity has increased since 2020 (UK vessels) with increased landings of sole and plaice.
- Catches by lines and static/drift nets are relatively minor.
- Variable but possibly declining catch of haddock.
- A decrease in the number of vessels in all size ranges.

¹⁸ from SEAFISH report

¹⁹ Other category contains “Miscellaneous Gears”.

The main *Nephrops* fishery is entirely dependent on access to the *Nephrops* habitat, making the fishery highly susceptible to any other marine developments, or plans that impact on this habitat and area. Even small losses of habitat can have a large impact, directly as a significant loss of catch, or indirectly as there is limited area to absorb any displacement and resulting change in fishing pressure.

UK Fleet

In 2024, there were 115 UK and crown-dependency registered vessels landing Irish Sea demersal species caught from the FMP area. This number of vessels is a 40% decrease from those active in the FMP jurisdiction a decade ago. The decrease is largely in the Northern Irish and Welsh registered fleets, but all UK nations have observed decreases. Of UK vessels which were active in 2024, the Northern Irish and English fleets made up 43% and 37% of the total, respectively.

Vessel Nationality	2015	2016	2017	2018	2019	2020	2021	2022	2023	2024
Isle of Man	3	1	2	1	15	14	3	4	2	1
UK - England	56	57	55	42	49	34	44	44	38	43
UK - Northern Ireland	93	111	99	81	87	68	68	65	52	50
UK - Scotland	11	15	13	11	12	8	8	7	7	8
UK - Wales	27	20	23	15	13	13	10	5	12	13
Grand Total	190	204	192	150	176	137	133	125	111	115

Table 7. Number of vessels registered in the UK and Crown Dependencies with landings of FMP species from the FMP area (English, Welsh, and Northern Irish waters in 7.a).

Length	2015	2016	2017	2018	2019	2020	2021	2022	2023	2024
8.00m and under	44	45	46	28	31	27	28	32	33	33
8.01 - 10.00m	33	35	28	29	29	28	20	15	7	15
10.01 - 12.00m	14	16	14	11	11	6	10	11	10	9

Length		2015	2016	2017	2018	2019	2020	2021	2022	2023	2024
12.01 - 15.00m	-	20	22	23	13	29	20	16	17	15	14
15.01 - 18.00m	-	20	20	20	19	23	16	13	9	7	4
18.01 - 24.00m	-	54	60	57	48	48	35	42	37	35	36
24.01 - 40.00m	-	5	6	4	2	2	3	2	2	3	4
Over 40.00m		0	0	0	0	3	2	2	2	1	0
Grand Total		190	204	192	150	176	137	133	125	111	115

Table 8. Number of UK and Crown Dependency vessels by length with landings of FMP species from the FMP area (English, Welsh, and Northern Irish waters in 7.a).

Northern Ireland Fleet

The NI fishing fleet by number and landing volume are the main fishing activity in the Irish Sea, predominately targeting *Nephrops* using bottom otter trawls, with single, double or even quadruple cod ends.

As of December 2023, there were 270 vessels licensed by DAERA, most 10m and over vessels are based in one of the three main ports. The last 10 years have seen a contraction of the fleet, across all vessel sizes. The fleet is generally comprised of older vessels. This high age profile raises a number of important issues for the local fleet, particularly with regard to ongoing seaworthiness, health and safety and fuel efficiency.

The whitefish fleet has declined since mid-2000s as cod and whiting stocks have declined. This fleet segment has almost disappeared in the last two years, and haddock landings have decreased in response. There are currently no dedicated full time whitefish vessels operating. This fishery is now mainly represented as a seasonal targeted haddock fishery, using a demersal otter trawl towed above the seabed (referred to locally as a semi-pelagic gear) or using an eliminator trawl²⁰.

²⁰ Standard otter demersal trawl with very large diamond meshes in the wings and forward part of the trawl [Eliminator Trawl | Selective device | Seafish Fishing Gear Database](#).

Vessel Type	2023	2024
Whitefish (e.g. haddock, cod, whiting) (full time)	0	0
<i>Nephrops</i> (prawns)	54	55
Whitefish / <i>Nephrops</i>	7	1
Pelagic (e.g. herring, mackerel)	3	3
Scallopers	2	0
<i>Nephrops</i> / Scallopers	12	14
Others	15	20

Table 9: The structure of the over 10m Northern Ireland fishing fleet 31 December 2023 and 2024.

English Fleet

In 2024, the English fleet was made up of 43 vessels with those 12 metres and under in length making up 84% of the total. The primary gears used by the English fleet are bottom-towed otter trawls, gillnets, and hooks and lines. The largest proportion of demersal species landings by the English fleet are of sole and plaice. Over a five-year period (2019 – 2023), landings of sole and plaice represented ~15% and ~26% by weight of the landings of these species from the FMP area, respectively. Together, over five years (2019 – 2023), sole and plaice made up ~49% (346 of 708 tonnes) by weight of the landings from this FMP by English registered vessels. English vessels over the same five-year period landed more *Nephrops* (350 tonnes) by weight than sole and plaice, but this represented less than 1% of all *Nephrops* landed from the FMP area.

Length	2019	2020	2021	2022	2023	2024
8.00m and under	20	17	21	27	22	23
8.01 - 10.00m	14	9	10	6	5	11
10.01 - 12.00m	4	1	4	3	2	2
12.01 - 15.00m	8	6	7	7	8	5
18.01 - 24.00m	2	0	1	0	0	1
24.01 - 40.00m	0	1	1	1	1	1
Over 40.00m	1	0	0	0	0	0
Grand Total	49	34	44	44	38	43

Table 10. Number of English vessels by length with landings of FMP species from the FMP area (English, Welsh, and Northern Irish waters in 7.a).

Gear Type	2019	2020	2021	2022	2023	2024
Beam trawls	3	3	4	3	3	2
Boat dredges	5	1	0	2	1	2

Gillnets (not specified)	10	9	7	11	11	4
Handlines and pole-lines (hand-operated)	2	1	1	1	0	0
Hooks and lines (not specified)	2	6	6	7	6	11
Longlines (not specified)	1	0	0	0	1	0
Nephrops trawls	6	5	5	3	2	1
Otter trawls - bottom	18	13	18	13	16	25
Otter twin trawls	1	0	0	0	0	0
Pair trawls - midwater	1	0	0	0	0	0
Pots	5	2	5	3	3	3
Set gillnets (anchored)	3	7	8	9	15	20
Trammel nets	2	1	0	0	2	1
Drift longlines	0	0	0	1	1	0
Set longlines	0	0	0	1	1	0
Driftnets	0	0	0	0	1	1
Unknown	0	0	0	0	0	4
Grand Total	59	48	54	54	63	74

Table 11. Number of English vessels by gear type with landings of FMP species from the FMP area (English, Welsh, and Northern Irish waters in 7.a). Please note that the grand total is not that of unique vessels because some vessels operate multiple gear types.

Welsh Fleet

The Welsh fishing fleet is largely made up of under 10m vessels using pots to target non-quota stocks. Over 10m vessels also predominantly target non-quota stocks such as scallop or demersal quota stocks that are not the focus of this FMP such as pollack, skates and rays and megrim.

FMP stocks of interest to the Welsh fleet in ICES area 7a are sole and plaice with bycatches of the other FMP stocks.

Social and economic comments

Allowing for any COVID-19 related impacts (2019-2020) fishing income has generally increased since 2016. However operational profit has decreased. The Seafish report

also identifies a decrease in the number of fishermen (measured as FTE) over this period.

There are numerous factors that impact on a fishing vessels ability to operate profitably, including

- crewing (timely access to skilled crew at competitive rates and welfare of the crew)
- efficiency of vessels
- working environment; this would include automation on board- impacting on the number of crew and the quality of the catch, operational health and safety of the vessel.
- being able to fully maximise the value of the catch. (without creating markets in undersized catch)
- dependence on key species and ability to change between fishing opportunities or develop new fisheries.

Stock Assessments and MSY

Scientific advice

The key source of information on the status of the stocks is the ongoing ICES assessment and annual advice provision. ICES is a leading scientific forum for management of the oceans and is engaged to provide annual advice for many commercial stocks in the North Atlantic.

MSY means the highest theoretical equilibrium yield that can be continuously taken on average from a marine stock under existing environmental conditions without significantly affecting the reproduction process.” Two important factors that contribute to the MSY assessment, the spawning stock biomass (SSB) and fishing mortality/pressure. SSB is the weight of the proportion of a fish stock that is able to reproduce. Only those stocks that have sufficient quantity of reproductive fish are capable of being fished at MSY. Fishing mortality also needs to be set at a level that does not diminish the stock’s ability to reproduce sustainably for it to be consistent with MSY. ICES provides advice based on an MSY approach. Further detail of ICES’s assessment framework and process can be accessed here:

- [Guide to ICES advisory framework and principles](#)

The relevant Irish Sea advice is produced each year by the working group for the Celtic Seas Ecoregion. The advice consists of an assessment of the historical status of each stock alongside annual catch advice. ICES also provides mixed fisheries considerations for the species under this FMP. The most recent advice can be found on this link - [here](#)).

Until 2025 the advice for the FMP stocks was category 1 - they have full analytical assessment and forecasts. An issue with the haddock assessment has resulted in this being downgraded in 2026 to a category 5 advice. ([see ICES for details on category definitions](#)). This issue also resulted in ICES not being able to provide mixed fishery considerations for the 2026 fishing year.

ICES annual catch advice provides a recent history of the development of the stock which can be compared to scientifically determined biological indicators²¹, allowing its status to be classified. The advice summarises recent catches, provides an estimation of recent fishing mortality (F), the spawning stock biomass (SSB) and recruitment.

A further key output from the stock assessment working group is the stock annex. This is a record of the information used to produce the ICES assessment, which is produced each time there is a significant revision of the assessment model/process or following

²¹ B_{LIM}, MSY B_{trigger} etc.

an ICES benchmark. It provides detailed information on the definition of the stock (distribution), description of the fisheries (historic and recent), ecosystem impacts, relevant technical measures in place, catches by fleets and any surveying and sampling.

These can be access at the ICES publication sharing website, [International Council for the Exploration of the Sea research repository](#)

Recent advice

Stocks develop and change over time; the scientific advisory process includes the re-evaluation of available data and models (benchmarking). Fishing opportunities for these shared stocks are set each year in annual negotiations between the UK and EU in accordance with the provisions of the Trade and Cooperation Agreement between the EU and the UK (TCA), guided by the best available scientific advice, balancing environmental, social, and economic factors. The principles followed by the UK in relation to international fisheries negotiations are laid out in the JFS under section 4.2.

For the 2026 fishing year, fishing opportunities for haddock, plaice and sole, were set within sustainable limits based on ICES advice.

Fishing limits for two notable bycatch stocks - Irish Sea whiting and cod, were set above ICES scientific advice.

ICES advises that to ensure *Nephrops* stocks are exploited sustainably, management should be implemented at the FU level. At present an aggregated single Total Allowable Catch (TAC) is applied across all FUs in Subarea 7. Of the 8 functional units in ICES Subarea 7, only 1 functional unit had significant landings greater than the advice in 2024. In the Irish Sea, FU 14 and FU15 have been generally fished sustainably (below ICES advice) for more than a decade. ICES advise that *Nephrops* should be managed at the FU level, rather than within a larger area, to ensure fishing opportunities reflect availability of each FU stock in line with MSY.

This FMP recognises that further work is required to explore whether a change in management approach is required, and to consider the options available. Further consultation will be important when considering the potential benefits and impacts and ensuring that stakeholders views are properly taken into account.

Assessment of evidence

The assessment models and advice that cover the stocks in this plan were, for the 2025 fishing year, identified by ICES as category 1 i.e. a full analytical assessment and forecast was possible, meaning there is sufficient scientific evidence available to assess²² MSY. ICES advice for 2026 has continued to provide a determination of MSY for these stocks, with the exception of the haddock stock, here downgrading is due to the detection of gaps in the scientific evidence. ICES and national scientific assessors are working to address these evidence gaps, but an MSY determination will not be possible until after a benchmark in 2028. The advice for this stock is now issued following ICES Precautionary Advice Approach, and TAC setting will be based on this advice.

For *Nephrops* the FMP notes that the total catch limit for Area 7, applied in the negotiations process, remains inconsistent with stock management at a functional unit level. However, a review of the catches within the functional units of the Irish Sea show they have been generally consistent with the MSY advice (albeit with a minor overfish of 4 tonnes in 2024 if FU limits are applied)²³. We therefore consider Irish Sea *Nephrops* has been fished according to an MSY approach in earlier years. The current catch limit setting process does not prevent the limit being exceeded in the future and this may happen in 2026 for FU15.

Stock	Evidence to allow assessment of MSY	Stock considered to fished sustainably	Comment
<i>Nephrops</i> (FU 14)	Yes	No	Based on ICES assessment of the functional unit. Catch has marginally exceeded advised MSY catch limit (226 v 222 tonnes)
<i>Nephrops</i> (FU15)	Yes	No	Based on ICES assessment of the functional unit
Cod	Yes	No	
Whiting	Yes	No	
Haddock	No	No	Historically fished following MSY advice
Sole	Yes	Yes	
Plaice	Yes	No	$F > F_{MSY}$, $SSB < MSY B_{trigger}$

Table 12 – Determination of scientific evidence to assess each stock at MSY based on ICES advice published in 2025.

²² Requirement of Fisheries Act 2020 Section 6(5)(d).

²³ For FU 14 ICES advised 222t in 2024, ICES determined landings were 226t.

Haddock, cod, whiting and *Nephrops* are caught together in a mixed fishery. Mixed fishery considerations give the likely bycatch implications of following ICES MSY catch advice for single stocks. These have been issued annually by ICES since 2022, for consideration in the setting of fishing opportunities (most recent is [here](#)²⁴).

As a result of this assessment this FMP should specify policies that:

- Contribute to maintaining the stock of sole at a sustainable level,
- Contribute (support management decisions) to the restoration and maintenance to sustainable levels the stocks of whiting, cod, haddock, plaice and *Nephrops* where possible, including considering the need for additional safeguards to protect *Nephrops* (FU 14 and 15).

Fisheries Management

Management strategy for Irish Sea demersal

The overarching aim of fisheries management in the UK is to preserve the long-term sustainable use of fisheries resources whilst minimising potential negative environmental, social or economic impacts. This is developed within the Joint Fisheries Statement (JFS) where the UK fisheries policy authorities lay out a shared ambition to deliver ‘world class, sustainable management of our sea fisheries and aquaculture across the UK, and to play our part in supporting delivery of this globally’. The JFS also states that ‘As part of being an independent coastal State, the fisheries policy authorities will work together to support a vibrant, profitable, and sustainable fishing and aquaculture sector supported by a healthy marine environment that is resilient to climate change’.

In UK waters fisheries are managed in line with UK fisheries legislation (such as the Act, UK and devolved government secondary legislation and former EU legislation which now forms part of assimilated law) and licence conditions where appropriate.

Multi annual plan (EC 2019/472)

Nephrops in ICES Subarea 7 and haddock in ICES Subarea 7.a are stocks covered by the Western Waters Multi Annual Plan (MAP) (EUR 2019/472).²⁵ The MAP contains measures to restore and maintain fish stocks above levels capable of producing MSY and requirements relating to the determination of fishing opportunities, implementation of the landing obligation and engagement with third countries to ensure the relevant

²⁴ This advice did not issue in 2025 for the 2026 fisheries.

²⁵ The Western Waters MAP was part of the EU Common Fisheries Policy, which was retained and now, as amended, forms part of assimilated law.

stocks are managed in a sustainable manner in line with the MAP objectives. The management of these species within this FMP should be within this overarching context.

Setting of Total Allowable Catches

All the stocks under this FMP are jointly managed with the EU. Total allowable catches (TACs) and other joint management measures, are set through international negotiations guided by the best available scientific advice, balancing environmental, social, and economic factors. Stock recovery measures would be more successful if applied across the range of the stock.

Current Harvest Strategies

Where stocks (i.e. sole) are being fished sustainably, the approach is to continue to harvest these stocks within the determined quota allowances, following the principles set out in the JFS. This would apply for those stocks showing short term/ annual variation, i.e. *Nephrops*. Only where there is a concern identified in a specific fishery is there a need to consider any change in approach. The difficulties around the assessment for haddock in 2026 do not detract from this approach, the stock is managed in line with scientific advice to maintain sustainable exploitation.

For *Nephrops* the overall approach is to continue to harvest in line with the jointly agreed TAC. As identified above the two FU' s (14 &15) of the Irish Sea are currently not considered to be fished sustainably, however there is no international agreement in place that would limit excessive removals from a single FU. Previously an “of which” restriction has been used to limit outtake from FU in poor biological condition, for example FUs in the West of Ireland and North Sea. These controls are reviewed annually during the TAC setting negotiations. It remains a possible control action depending on the relative development of the other Subarea 7 FUs.

Irish Sea Whiting received non-zero catch advice in 2026. Previously both cod and whiting were subject to zero catch advice. An internationally agreed approach by the EU and UK was to reduce catches as far as possible, not allowing any directed fishery, while allowing for a low level of unavoidable bycatch. This allowed for economically and socially important fisheries to continue- with appropriate avoidance and minimisation measures for the unwanted catches. At low levels of catches there were marginal gains in SSB evidenced for cod. Actions since 2000 to reduce catches of both species while maintaining valuable target fisheries have defined the technical measures in place for *Nephrops*, flatfish and whitefish fisheries.

Current Technical Conservation Measures

Technical Conservation Measures (TCM) are tools to support the delivery of sustainable fisheries, and include regulations on the size, construction and use of fishing gears, closures, fish retention sizes and discarding requirements. Following the 2025 EU/ UK bi-lateral the UK have undertaken to review exiting measures for *Nephrops* fisheries early in 2026.

The assimilated EU Technical Measures Framework (EU No.1241/2019) sets the baseline selectivity to be achieved. Greater selectivity can then be adopted to address the specific issues, such as for the Irish Sea in the technical measures in the assimilated EU Regulation No. 2239/2019.

The Marine Management Organisation provide guidance on the technical conservation and landing obligation (discard ban) regulations, including how the rules apply, selling undersize fish, reporting requirements and quota management. In addition, fishing vessel licence conditions also contain fishery/ area specific Technical Conservation Measures (TCM). The latest advice on the TCM in force can be located at the Gov.UK website, here [Technical Conservation and Landing Obligation rules and regulations 2025 - GOV.UK](#) The targeted fishing of haddock, and *Nephrops* in the Irish Sea requires the use of Highly Selective Gears.

The Landing Obligation²⁶ stipulates that all catches of quota species, including those below the Minimum Conservation Reference Size must be landed and counted against quotas. Exemptions to this requirement are possible, but despite the regulatory requirement discarding remains prevalent for certain species.

Cod closure

Assimilated EU Regulation (2019/1241) Annex VI, Part C, point 3, implements a closure for cod in the Irish Sea. This runs from 14 February to 30 April, and prohibits the use of any demersal trawl, seine or similar towed net, any gillnet, entangling net or trammel net or any fishing gear incorporating hooks within a described area of the Irish Sea. There is an existing derogation for gears with approved selectivity devices.

²⁶ The Landing Obligation is defined in Article 15 of Regulation (EU) No 1380/2013, which has been assimilated into UK law following the UK's exit from the EU. The regulation can be accessed via legislation.gov.uk. Subsequent exemptions—such as those based on *de minimis* catch levels or *high survivability*—are outlined in later UK statutory instruments.

Nephrops

The highly selective gear options that are available to the *Nephrops* fleet were historically driven by EU cod recovery programmes. The measures currently in use are the result of several years of progressive work by the NI fleet to develop highly selective gears that reduce cod catches while retaining economically viable catches of other species for cod. These gears have been maintained as they are considered to also reduce whiting catches.

The directed haddock fishery

During the period of the cod closure DAERA provide an additional derogation for several vessels to operate a directed haddock fishery, with the use of an approved highly selective gear and additional reporting and monitoring requirements. Access is managed under fishing vessel licence conditions -vessels fishing in the area must annually notify DAERA of the gears they intend to use.

Specific limits to any bycatch are agreed each year and monitoring has demonstrated that the fishery has a very low cod bycatch. In recent years there has been very little uptake of the haddock fishery. It is not clear if there will be any future targeting of this stock.

Transition across the Irish Sea

Following the withdrawal of the UK from the EU there are some differences in the technical measures in place in the Irish Sea. A key current difference is the use of an 'eliminator trawl' for targeting haddock. This gear is no longer permitted in the EU waters of the Irish Sea.

While there are valid reasons for accepting or amending the gear in use it is increasingly important, to maintain frictionless fishing patterns where possible and that the most effective gears, including developing gears / novel gears, are operable across the entire fishery. Existing regulatory approaches allow for the different administrations recognising gears that have an equivalent selectivity.

Minimum Conservation Reference Size (MCRS)

Minimum conservation sizes are set in amended EU Regulation (2019/1241) Annex VI, Part C. For the species within this FMP these are;

- Sole 240 mm
- Whiting 270 mm
- Cod 350 mm
- Plaice 270mm
- *Nephrops* (whole) 70 mm, carapace length 20 mm
- *Nephrops* (tails) 37 mm

Research and Development on New Technology

Following on from a series of gear trials in 2013 a NI Gear Trials Group was established in 2017. This is an industry lead project in collaboration with DAERA, AFBI and Seafish. The project steering group includes both of Northern Ireland's fish producer organisations along with these partner agencies. This collaborative approach has been the key driver behind gear development efforts in Northern Ireland in recent years.

The project, led by a full-time gear technologist, collects ideas from industry, and oversees trials of potential gear designs at sea. The analysis of results is reviewed by the project steering group. To date a range of gear trials have been undertaken in the Irish Sea Nephrops fishery, including inclined net grids; trawls with large mesh in top sheets, wings and covers, coverless trawls, lights positioned around escape points, luminous netting, dual cod-end trawls, leader lines in the trawl mouth, T90 cod-ends and the FloMo cod-end. The NI gear trials project has been mainly funded through fisheries grant aid administered by DAERA. Additional trials have also been funded through the UK Seafood Fund, Seafish and other contributors.

Some of the gear designs/ modifications that have been trialled have consistently reduced bycatch in *Nephrops* trawls without compromising the target catch over statistically robust numbers of tows.

A key difficulty identified by the Trials Group has been getting any new gear adopted. Sufficient evidence is required to demonstrate empirically the impact on target and bycatch species to inform scientific opinion and support adoption by the fleet. TCM need to be more reactive to changes in fishing opportunity and fleet behaviour.

Recent work has included extended trials of two devices that ran from October 2023 to October 2024. 48 tows of each experimental gear were undertaken on the Irish Sea Nephrops grounds. This work was funded through the Fishing Industry Science Partnership Fund (part of the UK Seafood Fund) The same trials have been run in the Shields fishery in the North Sea as a partnership. The NI project has also supported a long-term gear evaluation of repositioned and redesigned SMPs²⁷ in 2 or the 4 nets of a local quad-rig *Nephrops* trawler.

Future trials planned include the use of novel plastic trawl doors. The project is also working with Ulster University and other project partners on a controlled impact study of Nephrops gear on the seabed. Other gear related projects included a before/ after controlled impacts study involving the Northern Ireland fishing industry and Ulster University²⁸. This work was undertaken during 2024.

²⁷ Square Meshed Panel

²⁸ [Improved estimates of bottom contact and recovery \(RESONANCE\). / McGonigle, C; Syms, Craig; Harris, B.P. et al. Ulster University, 2025. 64 p](#)

In addition to continuing work aimed at bycatch reduction, future work will be aimed at supporting efficiency, fuel/ emissions reduction and reducing gear/ seabed interactions.

Monitoring, Control and Enforcement Measures

Fisheries regulations serve a range of purposes, including preventing actions which adversely impact sustainability of the marine environment. Fisheries policy authorities are focused on reducing the main risks for non-compliance with those regulations, for example relating to non or inaccurate reporting, use of illegal fishing gear and fishing in areas where activity is restricted.

Fisheries enforcement authorities are warranted to carry out enforcement of UK and EU fisheries legislation and associated control regulations that is intelligence-led, risk-based or is required by the UK's international obligations to ensure the conservation and protection of various species of fish. Enforcement of the respective regulations, domestic and international is in line with applicable guidelines for regulators.

Across the UK there are a range of assets to support this, including Sea Going inspections of fishing vessels by Fisheries Protection vessels, timely and accurate reporting of fishing activities to the competent authorities and 24/7 satellite monitoring and reporting provided by UK Fisheries Monitoring Centre. Sea Fisheries Officers warranted under various national and regional legislation and control regulations carry out sea going and land-based inspections to ensure compliance. Office based checks of fishing vessels are also required to ensure compliance and that fishing activities are being recorded accurately i.e. areas of capture and to provide assurances throughout the chain of traceability.

UK fisheries authorities apply a fishing vessel licensing regime along with control measures throughout the whole chain of traceability from catching to sale. These measures include requirements to record catch details whilst at sea, the weight of catch landed, transport and takeover documents once landed and sales notes from registered buyers. This comprehensive data set enables fisheries authorities to effectively monitor fishing activity and compliance with national and local regulations.

Fishing vessels over 12 metres are required to have fully operational satellite Vessel Monitoring Systems (VMS), and electronic logbooks, enabling authorities to remotely monitor and control fishing activity and encourage higher compliance. Understanding and being able to monitor and control where fishing activity is taking place is an important part of fisheries management, particularly where area restrictions are in place. Accurate and robust locational data is also crucial for informing marine planning decisions. VMS is also being planned to roll out across the under 12 metre fishing fleet

and will form part of the monitoring and enforcement regime for all fishing vessels once this rollout is complete.

Additional control requirements within Northern Ireland

DAERA Sea Fisheries Inspectorate is empowered by the Fisheries Act (NI) 1966 “the 1966 act”, Sea Fisheries Act 1968 “the 1968 act” along with subsequent Regulations and Byelaws to conserve, protect, promote, and develop commercial fisheries and aquaculture within its jurisdiction. In line with the Northern Ireland Protocol DAERA sea fishery inspectors must also consider any Protocol requirements for example application of the EU’s Illegal Unreported Unregulated “IUU” requirements. They are also required to inspect and certify that captured fish entering NI meet sustainability tests required by the EU. DAERA enforces fisheries legislation and to deal with those who breach the legislation in line with the DAERA Environment, Marine and Fisheries Group (EMFG) Enforcement policy.

Additional control requirements within Wales

Since 2022, all licensed under 12m vessels fishing in the Welsh zone have been required to have a functioning VMS system polling every 10 minutes.

The Sea Fish (Specified Sea Areas) (Prohibition of Fishing Method) (Wales) Order 2012 prohibits fishing for sea fish with fishing boats using bottom towed fishing gear within specified sea areas.

Vessels fishing within the 0-6nm area of the Welsh zone also need to comply with the byelaws of the former [Northwestern and North Wales Sea Fisheries Committee](#).

Environmental Considerations

Conservation Advice

FMPs are subject to legal and environmental obligations arising from legislation such as Habitats Regulations, UK Marine Strategy and the UK Marine Policy Statement, the Environment Act 2021, Marine and Coastal Access Act 2009, and The Northern Ireland Marine Act 2013. Alongside these requirements, FMPs seek to support a range of other existing environmental policies that focus on, enhancing the health of our seas for future generations, restoring marine biodiversity, and tackling the causes and impacts of climate change.

The Statutory Nature Conservation Body (SNCB) advice from Northern Ireland Environment Agency (NIEA) covers Northern Ireland territorial waters (from the coast to 12nm), Natural England covers English territorial waters (0-12nm), and the advice from NRW covers Welsh territorial waters (from the coast to 12nm) within the FMP area. The SNCB advice from the JNCC relates to the English and Welsh offshore region (from 12nm to British fisheries limit or the EEZ) of the FMP area. The evidence and advice that has been provided by SNCBs underpins the proposed policy goals and actions of this FMP. While the FMP provides an overview of this advice, details on the methods and data⁵ used by the SNCBs to identify risk levels can be found in the environmental report.

Conservation advice considered risks relating to Marine Protected Areas (MPAs), Priority Marine Features (PMFs) and UK Marine Strategy descriptors of Good Environmental Status (GES). The evidence and advice highlight the key concerns around interactions between the fishing activity and conservation features.

Marine Protected Areas

The conservation advice notes that existing MPA site management considers the impact of fishing activity that occurs within the site's boundaries, there remains potential for fishing activity outside MPAs to have impacts on the protected features of the MPA. The main impacts of the Irish Sea Demersal FMP on the designated features of MPS are reported as;

Impact on MPAs in Northern Ireland Waters

- While the risk to the conservation status of mobile species that are designated features of MPAs through bycatch from demersal trawls and seines is generally considered low, there are significant gaps in the available evidence, and this fishing activity occurs at a scale which has the potential for population level effects if bycatch rates are higher than expected. Therefore, the risk rating for bycatch in demersal trawls and seines is assessed as moderate. Continued or

enhanced monitoring and research has the potential to improve our understanding of risk and is essential for directing management in relation to these more sensitive species.

- Bycatch in pots/traps is assumed to be low, based on expert knowledge of the operational conditions of these fisheries, and limited exposure to sensitive MPA designated mobile species in Northern Ireland waters.
- Static nets and longlines present a considerable bycatch risk for birds and other mobile species which are designated features of MPAs in Northern Ireland waters. Bycatch in static nets is considered the greatest threat to harbour porpoise, and the primary source of bycatch mortality among seals. Gillnet fisheries pose a significant bycatch risk to diving seabirds such as common guillemots, razorbills, and European shags. There are also concerns about the seabird bycatch in longline fisheries, with fulmars being particularly vulnerable to bycatch in this gear type. Based on current evidence, the risk rating for bycatch in static and drift nets and hooks and lines is considered high. A continuation of current monitoring effort, supported by enhanced data collection and research to fill gaps is required to understand the scale of the problem and improve the ability to assess risk. This risk may be revisited in future as the evidence base develops.
- Juvenile gadoids are an important component of the diet for a variety of marine predators and are thus considered a key forage fish species. Forage fish are essential to marine food webs, often serving as the primary food source for higher trophic levels, including marine mammals and seabirds. Harbour porpoise, for example, are known to predate heavily on juvenile gadoids. The Irish Sea Demersal FMP either through targeted fishing, bycatch or downstream impacts on spawning and recruitment, is likely to impact the availability of juvenile gadoids and other prey species to marine predators designated within the Northern Ireland MPA network. Recognising a potential impact pathway but lacking sufficient evidence to provide a confident conclusion, we advise that the risk of prey depletion to designated features of MPAs from demersal fisheries be considered moderate. Certain fisheries are likely to present a great risk than others, but further work is needed to help disentangle these risks.

Impact on MPAs in English Waters

- There is a high risk to conservation status of designated mobile species (birds and mammals) from static nets.
- While the risk to the conservation status of designated mobile species from demersal trawls is generally considered low, there are still significant gaps in the available evidence. As a result, the FMP risk rating has been upgraded to moderate, taking a precautionary approach into account. Gathering additional evidence has the potential to downgrade this risk in the future.

- There is a moderate risk to designated mobile features (harbour porpoise) from reductions in the availability of juvenile gadoids as prey.

Advice for Welsh MPA designated features

The Welsh Government has been working with Natural Resources Wales (NRW) to evaluate the potential impacts of fishing on designated features of MPAs in Wales through the Assessing Welsh Fishing Activities Project. The project provides the framework of environmental evidence needed to support further assessment of the sustainable fisheries management changes being developed and implemented through FMPs. The first NRW comprehensive condition assessments for all 'wholly' Welsh Special Areas of Conservation and Special Protection Areas in summer 2025, showed no sites were assessed as being in 'unfavourable' condition due to fishing.

NRW were asked to provide risks-based nature conservation advice for Welsh waters in preparing the Irish Sea demersal FMP. The full advice can be seen in the Environmental Report accompanying this FMP.

When aggregating all gear types associated with medium or high-risk levels together, the following risk levels have been identified:

- There is a High risk inside and outside MPAs from cod and whiting bycatch affecting harbour porpoise prey availability;
- There is a High risk inside and outside MPAs from lamprey bycatch when they are attached to their host species;
- There is a Medium risk inside and outside MPAs from diving seabird bycatch;
- There is a Medium risk inside and outside MPAs from salmon bycatch; and
- There is a Medium risk inside the Northern Cardigan Bay and Liverpool Bay SPA for the common scoter and red-throated diver.

NRW advice surrounding the potential risks to sensitive Welsh MPA features from demersal fisheries and fishing methods in Welsh waters was not provided in the context of feature vulnerability to the low levels of fishing activity associated with Welsh vessels. Any Welsh management measures which may be considered for implementation beyond the publication of this FMP will also consider the limited type, scale, frequency and duration of recorded Welsh demersal fishing activity in determining the risks of fishery related impacts.

UK Marine Strategy Descriptors

The Marine Strategy Regulations 2010 (SI 2010/1627) require fishery bodies in the UK to take action to achieve or maintain GES in all UK waters. The UK Marine Strategy (UKMS) is a key pillar of marine policy in the UK, and the JFS is a cross-cutting measure which will help to deliver GES for commercial fisheries. Interactions are considered under a series of descriptors, as well as on priority features.

The conservation advice highlighted risks arising from fisheries to UK MS descriptors (D1 Biodiversity, D3 Commercial Fish and Shellfish, D4 Food-webs, D6 Seafloor Integrity and D10 Marine Litter).

On UK MS descriptors in Northern Ireland Waters

- There is a moderate risk²⁹ to achieving GES for the biological biodiversity of seals, due to impacts from demersal fishing activities. Although bycatch in static nets is a significant source of mortality for seals, and demersal fisheries may reduce the availability of prey, at their current scales these pressures are not thought to be among the primary drivers for change with respect to achieving GES for seals. However, there are still significant gaps in the available evidence and research is ongoing to understand the drivers of seal population dynamics in Scotland and the UK. As a result, the FMP risk rating is assessed as moderate. Continued monitoring and enhanced data collection and research to address knowledge gaps may allow us to reassess this risk in future.
- There is a high risk to achieving GES for the biological biodiversity of cetaceans and birds, due to impacts from demersal fishing activities. This rating is primarily driven by risk of bycatch in static net and longline fisheries for cetaceans and birds, respectively. Continued monitoring and enhanced data collection and research to address knowledge gaps may allow us to reassess or improve the geographical specificity of this risk rating in future.
- There is a high risk to seafloor integrity due to benthic disturbance caused by mobile demersal fishing activities. However, due to data availability, this risk is assessed only based on data collated across the >12m UK mobile demersal fishing fleet. It does not include impacts from static gears; while these are likely to be lower risk, these gears have the potential to significantly impact seafloor integrity if operating at a high intensity. Further work is needed to disentangle and quantify impacts from individual fisheries covered by this generic advice.
- There is a moderate risk of impacts from marine litter. More robust estimates of abandoned, lost, or discarded fishing gear in the fishery are required.

On UK MS descriptors in English Waters

- There is a high risk to achieving GES for seafloor integrity (D1 & D6) due to benthic disturbance caused by demersal trawls and the contribution to current

²⁹ **Draft GES rapid risk assessment categories:** Low risk = some risk does exist, but impact may not be of a scale to impact upon GES descriptors. Moderate risk = clear link between fishing activity and GES indicator but other activities also significantly contribute to current indicator status. Or where high-risk activity only makes up a small proportion of fishery. High risk = recognised link between fishing activity within FMP and failure of GES indicator. 'Risk unclear' used where situation is complex, and more work is required to understand true nature of risk.

failure to meet targets. Strategic work at a broad geographic scale is required to identify opportunities to mitigate risk and understand trade-offs.

- There is a high risk to achieving GES for seabirds (D1 & D4) due to bycatch in static nets.
- While the risk from trawls to achieving GES for marine mammals and seabirds (D1 & D4) is generally considered low, there are still significant gaps in the available evidence. As a result, the FMP risk rating has been upgraded to moderate, taking a precautionary approach into account. Gathering additional evidence has the potential to downgrade this risk in the future.
- There is a moderate risk to cetaceans (harbour porpoise) from reductions in the availability of juvenile gadoids as prey.
- There is a moderate risk to achieving GES for marine litter (D10) due to abandoned, lost or discarded fishing gear.

On UK MS descriptors in Welsh Waters

- There is a high risk to achieving GES for seafloor integrity (D1 & D6) due to benthic disturbance caused by demersal trawls;
- There is a moderate risk to achieving GES for cetaceans, seals, seabirds (D1 & D4) through bycatch from demersal trawls;
- There is a moderate risk to achieving GES for seals and seabirds (D1 & D4) through bycatch from fixed nets and drift nets;
- There is a high risk to achieving GES for cetaceans (harbour porpoise) (D1 & D4) and a moderate risk to achieving GES for all other cetaceans (D1 & D4) through bycatch from fixed nets and drift nets;
- There is a high risk to achieving GES for fish (D1 & D4) due to bycatch in demersal trawls, fixed nets, and drift nets;
- There is a high risk to achieving GES for cetaceans (harbour porpoise) (D1 & D4) through reductions in prey from demersal trawls, fixed nets, and drift nets;
- There is a moderate risk of achieving GES for marine litter (D10) from demersal trawls, fixed nets, and drift nets; and
- There is a moderate risk to achieving GES for seafloor integrity (D1 & D6) due to the transfer of INNS by demersal trawls.

The conservation advice also notes that:

- There is a high risk to achieving GES for seafloor integrity (D1 & D6) due to benthic disturbance caused by demersal trawls;
- There is a moderate risk to achieving GES for cetaceans, seals, seabirds (D1 & D4) through bycatch from demersal trawls;
- There is a moderate risk to achieving GES for seals and seabirds (D1 & D4) through bycatch from fixed nets and drift nets;

- There is a high risk to achieving GES for cetaceans (harbour porpoise) (D1 & D4) and a moderate risk to achieving GES for all other cetaceans (D1 & D4) through bycatch from fixed nets and drift nets;
- There is a high risk to achieving GES for fish (D1 & D4) due to bycatch in demersal trawls, fixed nets, and drift nets;
- There is a high risk to achieving GES for cetaceans (harbour porpoise) (D1 & D4) through reductions in prey from demersal trawls, fixed nets, and drift nets;
- There is a moderate risk of achieving GES for marine litter (D10) from demersal trawls, fixed nets, and drift nets; and
- There is a moderate risk to achieving GES for seafloor integrity (D1 & D6) due to the transfer of INNS by demersal trawls.

Risks to Priority species (Northern Ireland)

The Wildlife and Natural Environment Act (Northern Ireland) 2011 is the primary tool for the conservation and protection of Northern Ireland's threatened or endangered wildlife. The advice identifies that;

- The risk rating for bycatch in demersal trawls and seines is assessed as moderate for marine mammals, seabirds, fish and elasmobranchs listed as Priority Features. There is also a moderate risk of marine mammal and elasmobranch bycatch in pots/traps, driven primarily by entanglement risk to minke whale and basking shark. The risk of bycatch of other mobile species groups in pots/traps is considered to be low.
- Risk to seabirds and marine mammals from bycatch in longlines and static and drift nets echo the assessment of risk outlined above for MPA features (high), with an additional risk to fish/elasmobranchs.
- There is a high risk of mobile species bycatch in static and drift nets, and hooks and lines. Continued monitoring and enhanced data collection and research to address knowledge gaps may allow us to reassess this risk in future.
- Recognising a potential impact pathway but lacking sufficient evidence to provide a confident conclusion, we advise that the risk of prey depletion to Priority Features from demersal fisheries be considered moderate.
- The risk rating for physical impacts from demersal trawls and seines to Priority Features is considered high. While the physical impacts from pots/traps is likely to be lower, the relative impact will be linked to the intensity of pot/trap fishing in an area. Owing to a need for further evidence, the risk rating for physical impacts from pots and traps to Priority Features is considered moderate.
- The advice notes gaps in the evidence around entanglement, bycatch and impact on the seabed.

The disruption of fisheries independent surveys (i.e. standardised data collections in the field) is an emerging issue that has only recently been reported as a major concern

with the increase offshore renewable Energy (ORE) and marine protected area (MPA) developments.³⁰ Fisheries independent surveys are essential for sustainably managing fisheries, wildlife, and ecosystems.

These data collections are long-term time series that form the basis of accurate, precise, and timely science-based assessments and management advice for fisheries. Survey programs rely on scientifically designed, standard methods to sample species at multiple sizes, life stages, locations, time and habitats. A loss of continued data collection will have significant impact on the sustainable management of the fishery. This impact needs to be carefully monitored, and adaptations made to reduce any loss of quality.

Climate Change

The impacts of climate change are already apparent in the marine environment and increased sea surface temperatures, ocean acidification, fluctuations in weather patterns are predicted to impact on the ecology of the Irish Sea. We are already seeing warm-water species increasing in abundance in UK waters while some cold-water species have decreased, with these trends expected to continue in the future. The expected changes in species distribution will have consequences for commercial fisheries, and are likely to affect fishing behaviours, fishing quotas and will require adaptive management.

The UK Government and devolved governments are committed to reducing CO₂ emissions within the fishing fleet, and to improving resilience to climate-driven impacts across the sector and seek to support industry towards reducing emissions, creating a more sustainable system, ensuring high quality, nutritional food and maintaining and improving food security. By mitigating and reducing the impacts from changing climatic conditions, this will contribute to climate change, ecosystem and national benefit objectives outlined in the Fisheries Act 2020.

Marine ecosystems may provide opportunities to utilise marine storage of carbon to mitigate against climate change. The JFS directs that fishery policy authorities must recognise that the protection, restoration and sustainable management of blue carbon habitats provides a nature-based solution that can support adaptation and resilience to climate change, alongside benefits for carbon sequestration and biodiversity.

The UK policy authorities have different targets relating to climate change and are developing plans to support the drive towards net zero. The Climate Change Act 2008 (amended in 2019) sets a legally binding target of achieving net zero greenhouse gas emissions (GHGE) by 2050 across the UK, with an ambition of a 78% reduction by

³⁰ Example paper: <https://doi.org/10.1093/icesjms/fsae060>

2035. To support these targets, all sectors, including the UK seafood sector, must develop plans to reduce their GHGE and use alternative clean energy sources.

Additionally, this FMP aligns with the obligations set out in the Climate Change Act (Northern Ireland) 2022. This Act includes the requirement for DAERA to develop and publish the Northern Ireland Climate Action Plan and a Fisheries Sectoral Plan to support the achievement of net zero emissions by 2050. The actions within this plan contribute to the sectoral response by promoting low-carbon fishing practices, improving fuel efficiency, and enhancing resilience to climate impacts.

To support delivery of the climate change objective in the Act, the fisheries policy authorities will continue to take management decisions and negotiating positions that are evidence-based, setting fishing limits that are informed by the best available scientific advice, to support the ongoing resilience of fish stocks and the fishing fleets which rely on them. As additional research and evidence on climate change becomes available, UK administrations will work with the fishing industry to help them adapt to the impacts that climate change will have on commercially important species.

In addition to the impacts of climate change on fisheries, and the need to adapt to these changes, it is also important to consider climate change mitigation (and net zero targets) in relation to fishing.

FMP Policies

In developing policies for this FMP, fisheries authorities have considered related policies, international agreements, conservation advice and ongoing developments. They have identified additional evidence and measures needed to support the vision of this FMP and its objectives. Most actions within this FMP directly link to fisheries objectives outlined below. While FMPs help achieve these objectives, other policy tools are also available. The fisheries policy authorities have also considered the conservation advice received from the SNCBs and included the outputs from that work in considering where policy action may be needed.

In most cases further policy development work will be required for any new actions, which could include further evidence gathering or public consultation, along with the completion of appropriate impact assessments. This will form part of the FMP implementation phase.

Policy Goal 1: Harvest the stock of sole sustainably, at a level commensurate with Maximum Sustainable Yield.

Rationale

The primary aim of all FMPs, where there is sufficient available evidence to enable assessment of a stock's MSY, is to set out policies to restore or maintain stocks at sustainable levels. Given there is sufficient evidence to make an assessment of MSY for sole, this stock falls under section 6(3)(a) of the 2020 Act.

Stock status changes over time, and the scientific advice for 2026 identifies that sole is considered to be at a sustainable level³¹. The recent stock development has been taken into account in the TAC setting. We propose maintaining this approach, using the best information, scientific advice, mixed fishery considerations and socio-economic concerns in the setting of annual catch limits.

TACs are a key part of sustainable fisheries management, in the TAC setting for these jointly managed species we will seek to maintain fishing pressure within sustainable levels, while taking account of socio-economic factors. Policy authorities review stocks annually prior to TAC setting negotiations and will follow the principles laid out in the Fishery Management Framework in setting fishing opportunities. There is no immediate expectation of having to undertake a dedicated restoration programme.

³¹ "Sustainable level", in relation to a marine stock, means a level of that stock above biomass levels capable of producing maximum sustainable yield;

TACs are set for individual stocks, but many stocks are caught together in mixed fisheries as either target species or as by-catch. In such mixed fisheries it can be difficult to fish all stocks at MSY. Depending on stock development of the species it may be necessary to adopt TACs or other technical measures in the respective fisheries that allow for the different levels of interaction and maintain sustainable fisheries.

Actions to achieve this policy goal

- Action 1.1 Continue to work, in accordance with the JFS, with other policy authorities of this shared stock with the aim of maintaining sustainable harvesting.
- Action 1.2 Continue to take an approach to TAC setting and negotiations informed by the best available scientific advice, including mixed fishery considerations and social economic factors, in line with an MSY approach.
- Action 1.3 Work to address any identified evidence gaps and the use of fisher derived data.

Relevant Fisheries Act objectives

- Sustainability objective
- Precautionary objective
- Scientific evidence objective
- Equal access objective
- National benefit objective

Policy Goal 2: Harvest stocks of cod, whiting, haddock, plaice and Nephrops sustainably, contributing to restoring and maintaining the biomass above the level capable of producing MSY.

Rationale

The Fisheries Act 2020 requires that, where an assessment of the stocks MSY is possible, the FMP must specify policies to restore the stock or to maintain it at sustainable levels. There is sufficient evidence to make an assessment of the MSY for cod, whiting, plaice and Nephrops stocks in the Irish Sea therefore these stocks fall under section 6(3)(a) of the 2020 Act. However, these stocks are not currently considered to be fished sustainably and have not responded to the setting of restricted TACs.

For these shared stocks the most effective rebuilding/restoration plan, must be at the same spatial extent of the stock and address all fishing activity, including other fishing nations and fleets involved in the fisheries.

For whiting, the EU and UK have both committed to making ongoing effective reductions of Irish Sea whiting bycatches within the Nephrops fishery, agreeing to examine appropriate measures to make effective reductions of whiting bycatches and to continue progress to the introduction of improved technical conservation measures (TCM)³². The EU and UK have agreed to establish a joint evaluation framework and data collation activity for TCM. Following the 2025 benchmark³³ the stock continues to be fished above safe limits, and the SSB is below reference points. Catches are primarily discarded.

For cod, stock rebuilding is primarily limited by low recruitment, which is correlated with warmer temperatures and a very low SSB. Mortality from fishing activity is currently very low. Multiple years of higher recruitment would be needed to increase stock biomass relative to ICES reference points, to allow EU/UK revision of fishing opportunities and measures.

The policy for cod and whiting stocks is to continue to minimise and/or avoid unwanted catches. Cod avoidance and minimisation was initially the main driver for the development of the current gears permitted in certain fisheries in the Irish Sea. The recent focus of TCM development is to address catches of undersized whiting, without losing the selectivity for cod.

TCM are an important tool in supporting sustainable fishing, particularly in mixed fisheries to manage unwanted catches and minimise discards. While the baseline established in the TCM framework (Assimilated EU Regulation 2019/1241) remains in place there is scope to amend and develop more effective TCM. Following the EU/UK negotiations for 2026 fishing opportunities there is a commitment from both parties to work together to review the effectiveness of technical measures and adopt the most selective measure, or equivalent for Nephrops fisheries.

³² (c) Irish Sea i. The Delegations recognised the depleted state of the Irish Sea whiting and cod stocks. The Parties agreed to continue to examine appropriate technical measures in 2025 with a view to making effective reductions of unwanted bycatch within this sea basin. ii. The Delegations recognised the work on gear trials by Northern Ireland and Ireland for reducing unwanted bycatch of whiting in Nephrops fisheries, for example via the use of coverless trawls. The Parties agreed to continue to progress the introduction of improved technical measures within their 13 respective waters of the Irish Sea, focusing on making effective reductions of Irish Sea whiting bycatches within the Nephrops fishery. iii. The Delegations have initiated work on a joint evaluation framework and data collation activity for technical measures, for the Irish Sea through the SCF. The Parties agreed to continue this work in 2025 with a view to establishing coordinated measures to reduce Irish Sea whiting catches with the aim of supporting the recovery of the stock.

³³ ICES. 2025a. Benchmark Workshop on Selected North Sea and Celtic Sea Stocks (WKBNSCS). ICES Scientific Reports. Report. <https://doi.org/10.17895/ices.pub.28715180.v1>

An ongoing concern identified by industry is the legal and physical barriers to implementing new TCM. TCM are not limited to fishing gears and additional tools such as Remote Electronic Monitoring (REM) offer some management tools.

Recreational fishing has been highlighted in both stocks recent assessments and additional evidence may be needed for future management decisions. For whiting, recreational removals are estimated to be 10% of the total catch in 2024.

ICES has identified a number of issues with the assessment of haddock, with the advice downgraded to a Category 5 and advice issued on a Precautionary Advice Approach in line with section 6(4). This means there is not sufficient evidence to make an assessment of the MSY, and the stock is not currently considered to be fished sustainably.

The FMP must therefore (in line with the requirements of Section 6(3) (b) of the Fisheries Act 2020) specify policies for maintaining or increasing levels of the stock and steps to obtain the necessary evidence to enable an MSY assessment. This issue has already been addressed with ICES and national assessors. Actions set out below are to address this gap and apply the precautionary approach to fisheries management in line with section 6(4). Annual negotiations for UK fishing opportunities will also take account of the most up to date ICES advice when setting annual TACs.

The scientific advice for this stock will likely remain based on ICES Precautionary Advice Approach while the issues underlying the assessment are addressed in the planned 2028 ICES Benchmark.

Plaice is primarily caught as a non-target bycatch within sole fisheries in the Irish Sea; therefore, policies have been included below to better understand bycatch and discard issues, with the view to developing future measures to reduce this pressure on the stock.

As identified in previous sections, the most extensive fishery in the Irish Sea is the NI *Nephrops* fishery, catching to some extent all the species within this FMP. This is not the only fishery, the beam trawl fishery, targeting sole and plaice, and the limited directed whitefish fishery all have some by catch of these species.

ICES advises that management of *Nephrops* should be at the same spatial extent as the assessment area and advice, i.e. that fishing activity is aligned with the available catch in each assessed stock area, or Functional Unit (FU). To support sustainable *Nephrops* fishing, appropriate safeguards should be developed and their use considered to prevent over-exploitation and stock depletion at a FU level depending on stock development.

Actions to achieve this policy goal

Specifically for cod, whiting and haddock

- Action 2.1 Continue to minimise and where possible avoid catches of cod, whiting and haddock through the use of proven TCM.
- Action 2.2 Continue to support the development of TCM to reduce catches of these stocks, and other unwanted catches, through programmes such as the NI gear Trials Programme and UK/EU commitments.
- Action 2.3 Consider appropriate actions to gather evidence on recreational catch.
- Action 2.4 Undertake relevant research to support stock evaluation and develop actions as needed.
- Action 2.5 Support ongoing evaluation, development and of selective gears to reduce unwanted catches.
- Action 2.6 Initially REM may be trialled by DAERA as part of a research project on a small number of vessels.

Specifically for haddock only

- Action 2.7 Support ICES to address data weaknesses and evidence data gaps - specifically
- Restoring and stabilising survey coverage,
 - Evaluating alternative modelling approaches (including survey-based and data-limited Category 2 and 3 methods), and
 - Ensuring full documentation and transparency of methods and data inputs.
- Action 2.8 Take a precautionary approach to TAC setting, following the principles set out in the JFS until sufficient evidence is in place to make a robust assessment.
- Action 2.9 Continue to work with the EU with the aim of achieving the sustainable harvesting of the stock through international negotiations.

Specifically for plaice

- Action 2.10 Develop the evidence base on plaice bycatch and related discards.
- Action 2.11 Explore what measures can be taken to reduce plaice discard rates and discard survivorship.

Specifically for Nephrops

- Action 2.12 Undertake an options appraisal for functional unit (FU) management of Nephrops to support recovery. The appraisal will assess biological, environmental and socio-economic evidence, including impacts on fleet viability, fishing patterns, displacement risk, operating costs, emissions,

and coastal communities, as well as the costs, benefits and practical deliverability of different options.

Action 2.13 Consider options, where supported by appropriate scientific and socio-economic evidence, around setting limit and MSY reference points for biomass and fishing effort at a stock level (for FUs and areas outside of FUs) and adopt as appropriate and supported by scientific evidence.

Action 2.14 As part of the options appraisal, explore the potential development of an appropriate harvest strategy and supporting management tools that could be available for use at FU level if required, alongside the development of suitable measures which could be adapted to each FU, and which may to support recovery and be available for use in a stock depletion situation or collapse scenario should this occur in the future. In developing these measures, the circumstances under which quota management measures might be applied should be appraised, and consideration given to what those measures should be.

Action 2.15 Consult as required on any potential options for FU management, engaging stakeholders throughout the appraisal to inform assessment of biological, environmental and socio-economic impacts, and the appropriateness of different management tools, before any decisions on further development or implementation are taken.

Relevant Fisheries Act objectives

- Scientific evidence objective
- Bycatch objective
- Equal access objective
- Sustainability objective

Policy Goal 3: Support evaluation of the impact on fish stocks and fishing fleets from other developments impacting upon marine habitats.

Rationale

Fishing is not the sole activity carried out within the marine environment, competing interests and management decisions in other jurisdictions all contribute to spatial squeeze, with direct loss of ground or increased effort from displacement, as well as indirect impacts on fishing grounds and stocks.

The ecosystem approach³⁴ requires that the collective pressure of human activities is kept within levels compatible with the achievement of GES. Fishing activity alone is not the only concern in the marine environment and other activities impact both the

³⁴ as defined in the Fisheries Act 2020

ecosystem and on fishing activity. UK Marine planning and licensing controls must address (and document) the fishing industries views in their decision making and consider the impact on fishing activity and on spawning and nursery grounds.

We seek to support an evidence-based approach by ensuring as far as possible, complete and robust data is available to other sectors impacting on fisheries and marine habitats.

Actions to achieve this policy goal

Action 3.1 Provide evidence and information on fishing activity to underpin other management decisions in the marine environment.

Action 3.2 Collaborate with industry to identify upcoming concerns and support where possible the addressing of any evidence gaps.

Action 3.3 Support decision making that impacts on fishing activity by ensuring open access to the relevant evidence.

Relevant Fisheries Act objectives

- Scientific Evidence Objective
- Sustainability Objective

Policy Goal 4: Support ecosystem-based sustainable management by minimising the impact of Irish Sea Demersal fisheries on the marine ecosystem

Rationale

The JFS sets a commitment to managing fishing within an ecosystem context. An ecosystem-based approach is defined in the Act as ‘an approach which (a) ensures that the collective pressure of human activities is kept within levels compatible with the achievement of GES within the meaning of the Marine Strategy Regulations 2010, and (b) does not compromise the capacity of marine ecosystems to respond to human-induced changes.’

All forms of fishing have an impact on the marine environment and marine ecosystems to varying degrees, whether through the removal of target fish species, incidental bycatch of non-target fish or other marine species, or seabed interaction.

Understanding and minimising these impacts is part of an ecosystem-based approach. While there is a general awareness and understanding of the potential impacts there is some discussion over the scale and effect. The SNCB conservation advice obtained to support this FMP has identified impacts and evidence gaps that need to be addressed. Evidence is needed to inform actions to reduce any unwanted interactions with other sensitive marine species including seabirds, marine mammals and unwanted impacts on benthic habitats. Some of this work is ongoing but we seek to improve available evidence. This links to ongoing work of the UK Bycatch Mitigation Programme.

The main fishing activity in the Irish Sea utilises bottom-trawling techniques. Conservation advice has identified that bottom-trawling can have an adverse impact on seabed integrity and benthic habitats.

The risk of interaction with seabirds / marine mammals is dependent on the fishing activity. We need to improve the understanding of the risks and frequency of interactions or entanglements.

The disruption of fisheries independent surveys (i.e. standardised data collections in the field) is an emerging issue that has only recently been reported as a major concern with the increase in ORE and MPA developments.

Surveys are essential for sustainably managing fisheries, wildlife, and ecosystems. These data collections are long-term time series that form the basis of accurate, precise, and timely science-based assessments and management advice for fisheries. Survey programmes rely on scientifically designed, standard methods to sample species at multiple sizes, life stages, locations, time and habitats. A loss of continued data collection will have significant impact on the sustainable management of the fishery.

Actions to achieve this policy goal

Action 4.1 Support data collection under the UK Bycatch Mitigation Initiative to improve understanding of risk and frequency of sensitive species interactions; the effectiveness of existing mitigation and avoidance measures; and implement improvements. This includes the addition of seabirds and mammals to observer data collection forms, supporting the Seabird Conservation Strategy and Action Plan

Action 4.2 Identify and adopt effective incentives for fisheries to implement bycatch and entanglement mitigation measures. Including ongoing support of data collection and trials through the continuation and expansion of existing bycatch programmes (such as the UK BMI - Bycatch Monitoring Programme (BMP) and Clean Catch UK)

- Action 4.3 Collaborate across the UK to progress the UK Marine Strategy Programme of Measures (POM), including addressing marine litter and noise.
- Action 4.4 Continue to apply fishing management measures in MPAs and introduce additional measures as necessary. Evaluate the effect of any additional/ potential management measures put in place for MPAs, identifying cumulative impacts on the industry.
- Action 4.5 Support and enable the fishing industry to explore alternative gear options to reduce benthic impacts where needed through programmes such as the NI Gear Trials Programme. Continue to improve our understanding of benthic impacts within the Nephrops fishery and in other demersal Irish Sea fisheries,
- Action 4.6 Work with the international community to share best practice and lessons learned to contribute to the understanding, reduction and elimination of bycatch and entanglement globally.
- Action 4.7 Consider research into how an ecosystem-based approach to fisheries management could be incorporated into future iterations of the Irish Sea Demersal FMP and where these might align with comparable approaches for other species.
- Action 4.8 In Northern Ireland, review current AFBI reporting mechanisms to ensure robust and comparable data is available for all fishing activity. Continue to liaise with AFBI and other assessors to address any concerns in data collection and delivery of scientific advice.
- Action 4.9 In Wales, use Assessing Welsh Fishing Activities (AWFA) assessments to review the potential environmental impacts of current fisheries management practices and FMP linked proposed changes and consider mitigation.

Relevant Fisheries Act objectives

- Ecosystem Objective
- Scientific Evidence Objective

Policy Goal 5: Support progress towards sustainable fishing by maximising any economic and social benefit.

Rationale

Fisheries need to provide, as part of the sustainability objective social and economic benefit to coastal communities. Seafish³⁵ reports that the industry is faced with costs that are increasing more than value of the catch. In the long term this is unsustainable. Many of the causative issues are outside of the fishing administration's ability to control directly but the fishing sector needs to be supported where possible to address these issues.

Impacts on the fleet's viability include, poor market prices, access restrictions (direct/indirect) different jurisdictional approaches and impacts from other offshore developments.

Northern Ireland vessel operations are further impacted by access to crew, with current immigration rules impacting on the sustainable use of and access to fishing grounds. The fleet needs access to skilled crew, at competitive rates. In the longer term we would like to encourage new entrants into the industry.

Fisheries authorities have previously used financial measures to support the fishing industry, to develop and deliver long term economic goals and social benefits.

Actions to achieve this policy goal

Action 5.1 Explore funding opportunities to encourage industry-led development of strategies aimed at maximising the efficiency of fishing vessels while maintaining sustainable practices. This may include investigating the potential for automation, assessing circular economy benefits such as total catch valorisation and utilisation of by-products, and implementing diversification measures into additional fisheries. Additionally, consider support for gear modifications (including derogations) and guidance toward marketing resources.

Action 5.2 Encourage industry-led funding initiatives that enhance the appeal of seafood sector jobs and help ensure a domestic workforce. This may include measures to support new entrants, improve working conditions (such as safety, wages, and crew welfare), boost catch returns, and promote fish products as high-quality, low-carbon food sources.

³⁵ Irish Sea Demersal Fisheries Management Plan: Seafish Evidence Summary- in supporting documentation.

Relevant Fisheries Act objectives

- National Benefit Objective
- Sustainability Objective

Policy Goal 6: Minimise the impact of fish activities on climate change and support the fishing industry to adapt to climate change.

Rationale

In accordance with the climate change objective of the Fisheries Act and the statutory duties under the Climate Change Act (Northern Ireland) 2022, this FMP aims to reduce or avoid the adverse effects of fishing on the climate and to support the industry to adapt to environmental change.

Changing climatic conditions are a potential risk to maintaining sustainable Irish Sea fisheries and a supply of high-quality food. Fisheries managers need a robust evidence base, including how carbon emissions from fishing activity and supply changes impacts upon the environment and any contribution to climate change. This will include the impact with and future management of blue carbon. Evidence is also needed on the likely impact of climate change on fish stocks and fishing opportunities to support adaption to changing ecosystems.

Our understanding of how fishing affects the climate and how climate change will affect fish stocks, ecosystems, and coastal communities is still evolving. We need better evidence regarding:

- How to reduce carbon emissions from fishing operations in a sustainable way;
- The likely impacts of climate change on stock distribution, size composition, spawning grounds, plankton productivity, food webs and marine carbon stores.

Fishing provides a protein rich food source against potentially low carbon production methods. The issue of reducing fuel emissions is being explored and the age and condition of some fleets may warrant specific actions.

Actions to achieve this policy goal

Action 6.1 Consider how to undertake additional targeted evidence collection relevant to the Irish Sea and current fishing activity. This could include impact on carbon sequestering within Nephrops fishing grounds as well as evidence on marine interactions. We will evaluate potential options, such as continuation of the OSPAR data for ICES, and continue to request relevant advice and explore options to address data gaps.

Action 6.2 Explore actions to support industry in any adaption to climate change through research and innovation, including the mitigation of fishing vessel emissions.

Action 6.3 Evaluate and consider supporting the roll-out of new technologies and practices to decarbonise the fleet and build resilience, in line with the carbon budgets established under the Climate Change Act 2008.

Relevant Fisheries Act objectives

- The Ecosystem Objective
- Climate Change Objective

Implementation, Indicators, Monitoring and Review

Implementation

This FMP sets out a vision and goals for the Irish Sea Demersal fisheries, together with the policies and management interventions necessary to achieve these goals. This FMP proposes new measures but does not implement them. The actions and measures contained within this FMP will be followed by an implementation phase where delivery options will be further identified.

Delivery options can include voluntary measures, licence conditions, national and regional byelaws and statutory regulations. This implementation phase will build on the existing evidence base, any action taken throughout the FMP's development and the options discussed with stakeholders.

Indicators and monitoring the effectiveness of the plan

This is the first version of this FMP which sets out the first steps and longer-term vision necessary for sustainable management of Irish Sea fisheries. These plans will take time to develop and implement, and an adaptive approach will be applied. They will be reviewed and improved over time as more evidence is collected, in collaboration with the fishing sector and wider interests on the sustainable management of this fishery.

The key indicator will be the health of each stock, which is annually reviewed as part of the TAC setting cycle. ICES stock assessments assess how fish populations have

changed over time and the effect that fishing pressure is having on stocks. Key biological indicators are provided as reference points, which give indication towards their MSY, fishing pressure and SSB. Potential indicators to be used are:

- Restoration of fishing of the following stocks to sustainable levels; The stock of Nephrops in FU15, Irish Sea Plaice (ple.27.7.a),
- Maintenance of spawning stock biomass for sustainably fished stocks for the stocks of Irish Sea haddock(had.27.7a), Irish Sea sole(Sol.27.7.a), Nephrops in FU 14.
- Reduction of fishing mortality and restoration of spawning stock biomass for the stock of Irish Sea Whiting(whg.27.7.a)
- Restoration of the spawning stock biomass for the stock of Irish Sea Cod. (cod.27.7.a)

Other action specific indicators will be developed as the plans are implemented.

Additional scientific evaluation will also inform any review, for example CEFAS's sustainability of stocks report³⁶.

Review

As set out in the Act, this FMP must be reviewed when appropriate, and at least every 6 years. This formal review will assess how the FMP has performed in terms of meeting the objectives of the Act. The findings of these reviews will inform the development of subsequent versions of the FMP. Reviews can be taken sooner, for example, if an indicator identifies the need for review. The decision to review earlier will be taken by the fisheries policy authorities.

In addition, the report prepared and published every 3 years in relation to the JFS under section 11 of the Act will also report on the extent to which the policies contained in this FMP have been implemented and have affected the stock levels for the relevant FMP stocks.

³⁶ [Assessing the sustainability of fisheries catch limits negotiated by the UK for 2024 - GOV.UK](#)