CSCB MCZ Stakeholder Group Meeting 11

Date: 25 February 2026

Location: Northrepps Village Hall

Attendees Summary: A total of 17 stakeholders attended the meeting, with interests from Natural England, volunteer conservation organisations, local community members and the local fishing industry.

The meeting was chaired by Luke Godwin (Assistant Chief Officer (ACO)) in the absence of Julain Gregory (CEO and Chair of the Stakeholder Group).

1. **Welcome and meeting etiquette**

The Chair welcomed members to the meeting and reminded all in attendance of the meeting etiquette.

2. **Stakeholder updates**

Updates were provided by stakeholders to describe their activities over the past 12 months in the MCZ:

Fishing Industry Update – John Davies (Cromer Crab and Lobster Fisherman and chair of North Norfolk Fisherman's Society (NNFS)) provided an update on crab and lobster fishing within the MCZ. In summary, the crab fishery had started well but catches declined unexpectedly in late spring / early summer. The reasons for the decline in catches is unknown but potentially thought to reflect a change in feeding behavior given the sudden decline and given the sudden re-emergence of catches following autumn swells. The lobster fishery was more consistent with previous years. Industrial work offshore at Weybourne has displaced some fishing vessels, with the effect that fishing activity was more concentrated in certain areas. Overall, it was described as a challenging season but the industry is not concerned about longer term sustainability or viability.

Sheringham beach clean update – Rob Spray (Local diver and chair of Marine Conservation Norfolk Action Group (MCNAG)) gave an update on behalf of Sheringham beach cleaners. During the summer, the amount of litter was found to have reduced, indicating that holidaymakers and beach users are being more responsible with litter and are making more of an effort to keep beaches clean.

Fishing litter was found to be consistently present however, including in the form fish boxes, nets, ropes and plastic coatings from crab and lobster pots.

Three separate bundles of crab fishing gear were found washed ashore at East Runton. Beach litter pickers and local fishermen worked together to remove the gear which was described as a good example of how beach cleaners and fishers can work in partnership to remove gear washed up on Norfolk's beaches (see associated slides for full update).

Discussion point

It was noted that the uptake of tags affixed to fishing pots (which is currently encouraged through voluntary measures) will increase accountability and make it easier to identity gear owners. It was highlighted that some tags seem to be unreadable now, but this is being investigated. It is suspected that these tags were not put in the correct locations..

Seasearch update - Rob Spray (Local diver and chair of MCNAG) gave an update on behalf of Seasearch East. It was a short dive season from May to September with 101 surveys carried out in East Anglia. Many of the surveys were MCZ multihabitat surveys with various species identified. Two sections of a broken-up telegraph cable were also removed over several days in early July (see slides for full update).

Norfolk Marine Mammal Entanglement - Luke Godwin (ACO and Chair) gave an update on behalf of Ben Nurse from Marine Conservation for Norfolk Action Group (MCNAG). Most entanglement incidents involve grey seals. In 2025, 63% of reported entanglements were caused by fishing gear, a decrease from 2024 with the most common cause of entanglement being Monofilament net (see slides for full update).

Discussion point

There was a feeling that most entanglements involve grey seal due to the population increases over recent years. Causes of deaths for seals were also described as being related to windfarm boat propellers.

3. Eastern IFCA update

Samantha Hormbrey (Senior Marine Science Officer (Policy and Projects)) gave an update on Eastern IFCA research and management workstreams:

Natural Disturbance Study - On track - The aim of this workstream is to quantify any change of structural complexity between areas open to pot-based fishing and areas where fishing is prohibited. Acoustic surveys were completed recently. The study design has also been reviewed by an external consultancy, which concluded the study was fit for purpose but provided some additional suggestions. This included increasing location accuracy and the use of lasers to provide scale. The findings of the external report will be published on the Authority's website in due course.

Discussion point

Feedback that the review of the study design from an independent external company was needed, but concern that there has not been transparency with who did it and what the outcomes were. The name of reviewer (APEM) was shared with the group and both the report, and a summary of the outcomes will be published on the website shortly.

Chalk Value Study – delayed due to previously being on hold- (update covered later in the meeting, see agenda item 8).

Mapping Potting Activities - previously on hold due to lack of data but now picked back up with a focus on data analysis.

Assessment of potting - The 2025 interim report has been drafted and informs an updated risk review. The rates of damage assessment continues to be developed with

Natural England and a second update is planned for the next quarter. The outputs of which inform risk and the development of permit conditions.

Management Update - Monitoring of the uptake of tags and voluntary code of best practice is ongoing. The byelaw is going through final stages of QA with MMO, and the next permit condition review is planned for summer 2026, informed by ongoing risk reviews.

1. **Adaptive Gear Workshop**

Luke Godwin (ACO and Chair) introduced the workshop:

The workshop explored ideas for designing pots that would avoid or significantly reduce impacts on the chalk seabed and ignored consideration for cost and practicality. Each group designed what they considered a "perfect pot" in terms of minimising chalk damage, and a facilitator shared the ideas back (summarised below). A fishermen's panel then reviewed the concepts, explaining why certain designs wouldn't work in practice and highlighting likely practical and cost constraints. It was intended that groups would then re-design pots considering the feedback from the fisherman panel, however time constraints prevented the latter task.

The designs for each pot were based on types of chalk damage. Rob Spray (Local Diver) introduced the types of damage which are caused by potting activities. See presentation for full details.

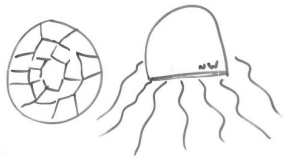
> *Discussion point*
> *Images shown of damage to chalk from pots were clarified to be from 2015, and some questioned if there was evidence of pot related damage occurring since. Similarly, questions were raised about the need for protection of the chalk if evidence suggests that damage has been occurring since 2015 and chalk is still present. It was explained that potting does not remove chalk entirely but rather reduces its structural complexity, which is vital habitat for crabs and a key reason the chalk feature was designated for protection.*
>
> *It was also noted that the evidence provided did not consider other natural or anthropogenic pressures. It was clarified that the extent of natural damage is being addressed separately through the Natural Disturbance Study, and that this workshop was intentionally limited to understanding pot-related impacts.*

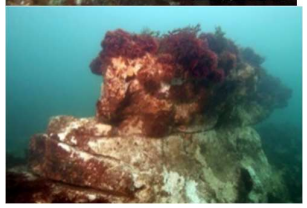
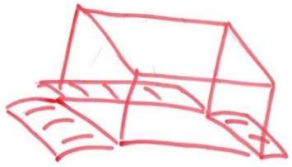
Groups were formed around these key types of damage:

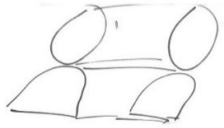
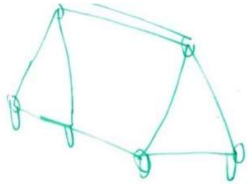
- Pot strikes during setting/hauling – damage to the chalk arising from pots striking against raised chalk features as they fall to the seabed or are being lifted from the seabed
- Ropes in situ – pots are deployed in 'shanks'; a line of pots connected to a ground rope. These ropes can cut into chalk features during deployment causing damage to raised chalk features
- Pots in situ – once deployed, pots typically move over the seabed to an extent as a result of wave action. Pot movement can cause abrasion or strike against chalk features.

More information on the different 'types' of damage caused by potting can be found within the following Natural England report - Human impacts on Cromer Shoal Chalk Beds MCZ: Chalk complexity and population dynamics of commercial crustaceans - NERR04412 The outputs from the discussions are summarised in the table below.

Table 1. Gear design ideas and associated constraints

		Gear design adaptations to reduce interactions:	Constraints of gear design in practice:
Reducing pot strikes during setting/hauling	 	Adding cushioning to pots (rubber, plastic, or rope padding) around pot edges to soften contact and reduce damage from sharp metal frames. Replacing traditional metal frames with wooden or plastic structures that are less abrasive on chalk. Using lighter weight pots to reduce the force of impact during deployment and recovery. Modified Pot Shapes or rounded designs such inkwell style or curved pots could minimise hard edges and reduce strike intensity.  Using softer lay ropes to lessen abrasion when ropes come into contact with the seabed during hauling. Exploring different anchoring options, including railway tracks or flint anchors, to stabilise gear while reducing movement that can contribute to pot strikes.	Cushioning on pots (rubber, rope, plastic padding) would be a lot more work to install and maintain, and padding quickly wears off in fouling conditions. Alternative materials like wood or plastic are not practical because they are less durable, degrade faster, or become waterlogged. Lighter pots need to be weighted anyway, as a pot must stay in place against tides and swell, so weight reduction is not feasible in practice. Rounded or curved pot shapes (e.g., inkwell designs) are not stackable, reducing the number of pots a vessel can safely carry. Softer lay ropes wear out faster and require more work to maintain or replace. Alternative anchors (railway tracks, flint) would still need enough weight to hold gear in position, adding more work and sometimes complexity without reducing contact much.

Reducing impacts associated with ropes in situ	 	Triangular shaped pots could be more stable on the seabed and less likely to roll or scrape across chalk. Skirts or flanges could improve stability and reduce lateral movement. Adjustments could be made to increase downward pressure, helping pots stay in place and preventing dragging.  Use of flexible materials such as wicker style or spring loaded frames to cushion contact and reduce rigid impacts on chalk. Using rope materials or profiles that create less drag in tidal flow, reducing the likelihood of sweeping or scouring across chalk. Keeping ropes tighter or weighted to minimise seabed contact and movement. Reducing size and height of the pots: smaller pots will be less influence by tidal action, reducing rubbing on the chalk, they will also have a smaller footprint. Can be paired with less pots per shank.	triangular pot shapes may be more stable, but they are not stackable, meaning fewer pots can be carried and handled efficiently. Skirted pots add bulk and complexity, making gear heavier and much more work to deploy, haul, and store. Down-force features still require extra weighting, so the pot must be heavy regardless, defeating the purpose and increasing hauling effort. Flexible or springy designs (wicker, sprung frames) would require significantly more work to build and maintain and are unlikely to withstand commercial use. Improved weighting/tensioning systems still rely on added weight or tight lines, increasing handling time and making operations more labour intensive. It would cost a significant amount to re-equip the fleet with small pots, especially at their own cost. Smaller pots will also have less space for catch and may lead to more deaths from fighting/overcrowding.

Reducing impacts of pots in situ	 	Shifting to a more ‘rounder’ design such as inkwell pots or turtle shaped pots to minimise damage by removing sharp edges.  Replace rigid or angular components with smoother and curved surfaces. Explore wooden frames or softer composite materials as alternatives to traditional harder metals. Metal bar frames in place of netting to avoid snagging or scraping, Pressed-steel pots cut to smoother shapes or Oak bases with drain-pole sides to reduce abrasive contact  Re design pot geometry to distribute weight more evenly and lessen the likelihood of point loading on chalk surfaces.	Proposed rounded or oval pot shapes are hard to shoot cleanly and behave unpredictably on deck. Not stackable, meaning fewer pots can be carried and deck space becomes unsafe or inefficient. Wood is not practical and it becomes waterlogged, degrades quickly, and needs frequent replacement. Alternative structures (e.g., metal bar frames, pressed-steel shapes, oak bases) are often too heavy, costly, and still don’t stack well. Adjusted shapes to distribute weight more evenly generally conflict with operational needs, making pots bulkier or harder to handle.
		Use stainless steel to reduce reliance on plastics and incorporate sustainable, non-leaching materials to minimise environmental risk. Triangular pot designs that are less likely to roll or scrape when moved by tides. Possibly explore other shapes that roll more smoothly, reducing scraping intensity.  Increased use of rounded or rubber coated corners to soften contact with chalk. Secondary bars on top of the frame instead of rope could reduce snagging and abrasion.	Stainless steel and similar materials are much more costly and make pots heavier. Triangular or alternative shapes make baiting difficult and usually don’t stack, reducing efficiency. Rubber coated or rounded corners add cost and wear out quickly in use. Adding secondary bars increases build cost and can make pots top heavy, meaning they may set incorrectly on the seabed. Overall, these design changes reduce practicality, efficiency, and ease of use for commercial fishing.

The workshop was concluded and there was lots of suggestions to be considered to reduce the different types of damage caused by pots and the workshop achieved its aim of understanding the key constraints that need to be considered when developing gear adaptations.

2. **Stakeholder Q&A**
    - *No Questions were raised during this session*

3. **Value of Rugged chalk recruitment-Industry support**

Ron Jessop (Senior Marine Science Officer (Research)) gave a presentation on the Value of rugged chalk project. The aims and objectives of the project were discussed with a focus on Objective 3 (interviewing fishermen to understand which factors (crab metrics) influence how they sort their catch and decide where it is sold, and how these decisions affect the value of the catch). A questionnaire has been developed to collect the information required to address this objective and it was queried with fishermen how they would best like to participate. Any fishermen interested in participating can contact Yliam Treherne (Marine Science Officer).

4. **Lost gear protocol**

Luke Godwin (ACO and Chair) gave an update on the lost gear protocol. Lost potting gear is known to present a high risk to the chalk beds. Historically, fishers reported lost gear to Eastern IFCA, but no recent reports have been received.

> *<u>Discussion point</u>*
> *Stakeholders noted that they rarely see pot tags on lost gear. Given that the vast majority of pots within the MCZ now have tags, this may indicate that very few pots were lost during 2025.*

It was put to the group to consider how best to encourage reporting, with options including an online form, text message, WhatsApp group, or email.

> *<u>Discussion point</u>*
> *It was agreed among members that WhatsApp was the preferred option for disseminating reports of lost pots, as it provides a direct line of communication, especially for fishers who are not part of a fishing association.*
>
> *Questions were raised about whether Eastern IFCA retrieves lost gear. It was clarified that Eastern IFCA does not routinely retrieve gear, but may assist where possible, and other fishers may also be able to help if aware of its location in accordance with the 'dive protocol'.*
>
> *It was also proposed that the dive protocol could include sending an email notification to local divers when lost gear is reported, so they are aware and able to pass on information if encountered underwater.*

5. Looking forward 12 months

Samantha Hormbrey (Senior Marine Science Officer (Policy and Projects)) gave an overview of the planned projects and outputs anticipated for the next 12 months. See slides for more information.

<u>Discussion point</u>
Marker buoys (which mark out the NDS closed areas) are also due to be re-deployed in the coming weeks, when a suitable weather window is identified.

<u>Other discussion points:</u>
The group discussed how best to communicate Eastern IFCA updates about stakeholder meetings and the wider Cromer Shoal Chalk Beds management. Social media and the website were identified as key platforms to share ongoing updates as well as letters containing essential information for those who prefer or require direct communication or who are not a part of an association, particularly regarding management.

Concerns were raised that the recent northerly winds may increase marine litter and natural damage along the coast.

Stakeholders noted that additional litter has recently been observed washed up, including material seen wrapped around groynes, which may be linked to previously lost buoys. Eastern IFCA will look into this during upcoming patrols.