

Wash cockle Fishery 2026: consultation outcome document



This document details the outcomes of the consultation about management measure proposals for the 2026 Wash Cockle Fishery. The consultation was held between 29 May and 11 June following an industry meeting (Curlew Centre, Sutton Bridge) on 19 May.

N.B. following results received from Cefas regarding the absence of *martelia* (the parasite thought to be responsible to ‘atypical mortality’) in cockles at the ‘new’ Hunstanton bed, the Authority has decided not to open the bed until further dialogue with fishing industry on suitable biosecurity measures. It is intended that the closure is temporary and that fishing activity will be permitted in the area once biosecurity measures have been developed. Further information is provided as an appendix to this document.

We asked:

The views of Wash cockle fishers were sought in relation to the proposals for a cockle fishery to open in The Wash. The consultation included an industry meeting to develop proposals and a consultation to gather views and inform decisions on the management of this fishery.

You Said and Our Response:

The consultation generated 22 responses from fishery stakeholders which include responses from individuals holding multiple permits and an association representing multiple interests (which was received prior to the consultation).

Consideration of responses to the consultation includes views expressed at the industry meeting (19 May 2026). A full report of the outputs of the industry meeting is being prepared and will be published in due course.

In summary:

- Industry views were broadly supportive of the proposed 2026 fishery arrangements, with most agreement on an early opening, the proposed closures, and keeping the initial operating pattern under review later in the season.
- On the opening date, views leaned toward opening on 15 June, although some fishers preferred a later start or raised concerns about short notice, tides, and whether yields would improve with more time.
- The Authority’s response is to open the fishery on 15 June 2026, reflecting the broad support expressed and the earlier industry discussions.
- On closed areas, respondents generally supported protections for juvenile cockles and other sensitive areas, while asking for monitoring and flexibility if conditions change.
- The Authority’s response is to retain the closures as proposed and monitor them through the season for die-off or other changes.

- On operating times, the main industry concern was that there may be too many open days later in the season, especially where tides are very early or late, although some wanted to maximise fishing opportunity while yields are best.
- The Authority’s response is to leave operating times unchanged for now, while keeping them under review as the season progresses.
- On other measures, the strongest industry theme was support for retaining the 2-tonne daily quota, with concern that increasing to 3 tonnes could reduce prices, increase waste, and cause greater damage to the beds.
- The Authority’s response is to keep open the option of increasing the daily quota later in the fishery if needed to help achieve uptake of the TAC, while taking account of economic impacts, fishing activity, available stock, and industry views.
- It is also important to note work to establish a Wash Forum is underway. It is intended that this small group of fishery representatives will be able to provide information and views from wider industry to inform management measures during the season. This will be of particular benefit to further considerations on the operating times later in the season and review of the 2-tonne daily quota.

More detailed consideration of proposals in the context of consultation responses is divided into sections, focusing on the key measures.

Opening date of the fishery

At the industry meeting of 19 May 2026, there was a general consensus that the fishery should open on 15 June 2026. Those in attendance understood that to achieve such, it would be likely that there would be a short notice period (less than the target of 7-days) to facilitate the opening date. To gauge the views of industry, two key questions were included within the question as set out below (Figures 1 & 2).

Fig 1. Are you in agreement with the proposed opening date?

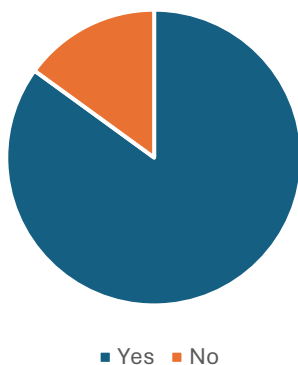
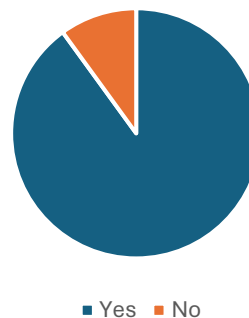


Fig 2. Are you in agreement with the potential for a short notice period for the opening of the fishery?



There were 11 substantive comments provided along with the answers which are summarised below:

- Support for opening on/around 15 June: expressed by 5 respondents, mainly because cockles were considered ready, growing well, or fishermen were ready to return to work.
- Preference for a later opening date: raised by 3 respondents, including suggestions for 28/29 June or a week later, due to tides, yield uncertainty, or concerns cockles may be too small.
- Short-notice concerns: mentioned by 3 respondents, mostly around needing more notice for family, planning, or operational reasons. One respondent accepted short notice for this year but wanted more notice in future.
- Yield/quality/timing themes: raised by 5 respondents, with comments linking the opening date to cockle density, growth, best yields, and the ability to fish TAC while yields are optimal.
- Tide/open-day considerations: raised by 2–3 respondents, especially around aligning opening dates with suitable tides and maximising workable fishing days.

Overall, views were mixed but **leaned toward accepting an early opening**, provided timing supports good yields and workable tides. The main repeated concern was that short notice should be avoided where possible in future years.

Given that there was broad agreement with the opening date and the short notice period, the fishery will open as of 15 June 2026.

Closed Areas

Proposed closed areas included areas for the protection of high-density juvenile cockles, closures for protecting against seal disturbance during the sensitive 'pupping season' (1 June to 31 August) and closures to protect aquaculture areas.

There were 11 substantive responses to this question which are summarised as follows:

- Support/agreement with proposed closures: expressed by 7 respondents, including comments such as "I agree," "all good," "happy with the closures," and "no objections."
- Closures should protect juvenile/year 0 cockles: raised by 4 respondents, with support focused on conserving juvenile cockles, lays, or year 0 stocks.
- Need for monitoring closed areas: mentioned by 4 respondents, especially to check growth, mortality, ridging out, or whether areas should be reopened if conditions change.
- Concerns about specific closures: raised by 2 respondents, including concern about West Mark Knock containing year 1 cockles and opposition to closures for seal haul-out areas.

- Enforcement/policing concerns: raised by 1 respondent, noting closed areas are only useful if properly policed.

Overall, responses were broadly supportive of closures, particularly where they protect juvenile cockles, but several respondents wanted active monitoring and flexibility to reopen areas if cockles mature, die off, or conditions change. This aligned with the discussions at the industry meeting.

Given that there was broad support for the closures, the closures will remain as proposed and the Authority will seek to monitor these areas throughout the season to detect die-off or other changes to conditions.

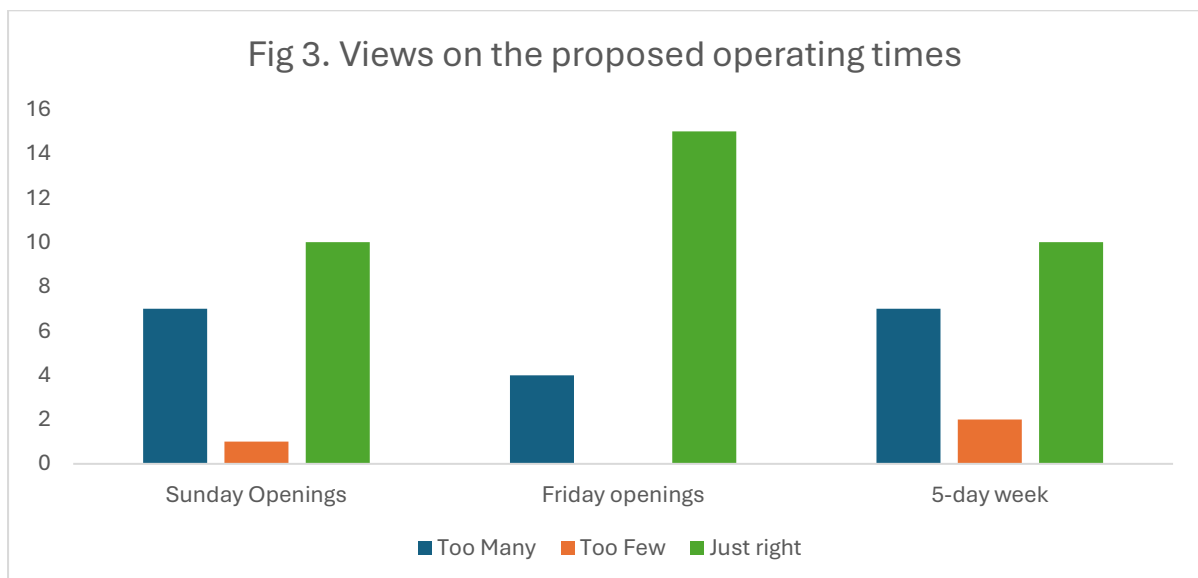
Operating times

Operating times are developed in the first instance in a manner seeking to achieve the following established principles:

- 4-day week open periods.
- Weekday openings (Mon to Fri).
- Minimum tide height of 6m.

Often, Sunday openings are included to provide access to the Holbeach cockle cockles which are not accessible to hand-work fishers during weekdays when the area is used as a military bombing range. In addition, 5 (or more) day open periods are also often included to make up for lost fishing opportunity due to unsuitable tides.

Respondents were asked to indicate, given the proposed operating times, what their views were on key aspects of the operating times (Figure 3).



There were 13 substantive responses provided to support the answers provided.

- Too many open days / 5-day weeks: raised by 6 respondents, especially from late July/August onwards.
- Concerns about very early or late tides: mentioned by 5 respondents, with several suggesting no openings before 4am or after 10:30am.

- Preference for fewer days / 4-day week: raised by 2 respondents, including time for vessel maintenance and checking beds.
- Need to maximise fishing opportunity: expressed by 3 respondents, arguing all suitable tides should be open to fish TAC while yields are best.
- Sunday opening concerns: raised by 1 respondent, preferring no Sunday opening unless Friday is closed.

Overall, comments were split, but the most common view was that there are too many open days later in the season, particularly where tides are very early or late. A smaller group wanted to keep as many suitable days open as possible to maximise fishing while yields are optimal.

Given that there was broad agreement with the operating times earlier in the season, the operating times will remain unchanged at this point and further reviewed during the course of the season.

Other management measures

Respondents were also asked to provide views on other management measures. Key 'other' measures included the daily quota (which starts at 2-tonnes per day), vessel tracker requirements.

There were 16 substantive responses provided in addition to the discussion points provided from the industry meeting which are summarised below:

- Keep the daily vessel quota at 2 tonnes: raised by 10 respondents, often saying 2 tonnes has worked well and should remain for the full season.
- Opposition to increasing to 3 tonnes: raised by 7 respondents, mainly due to concerns about lower prices, excessive prop washing, harder work, waste, and damage to the ground.
- Price/value concerns: mentioned by 5 respondents, with several saying higher landings could reduce buyer prices and undermine the fishery's premium.
- Enforcement/tracker concerns: raised by 2 respondents, including criticism of vessel trackers and overnight fishing in closed boxes.
- Different approach for Hunstanton/non-drying areas: raised by 3 respondents, suggesting different fishing methods (dredging) or no special dates.

With regards to the Hunstanton fishery, a full discussion was held on this matter at the industry meeting, and the general consensus was to maintain a hand-work fishery in this area. Dredged fisheries in The Wash were the subject of a 'shadow' Habitat Regulation Assessment in 2019 and it was identified that the Authority could not rule out adverse effects from a dredge fishery. However, it is also understood that some industry members are keen to explore alternative means of 'dredging' including alternative dredge types (which could be less damaging). Further consideration on the matter would require further industry input and it is considered

appropriate that this would be a discussion point for the Wash Forum in the first instance.

Overall, the strongest theme was clear support for retaining the 2-tonne daily quota, with significant concern that moving to 3 tonnes could reduce value and increase waste or damage. It is noteworthy that the same concern was not provided during the industry meeting. Further consideration is given to the daily quota in particular below.

The daily quota

At the industry meeting, it was identified that there may be benefit in moderating the daily quota during the season because the TAC was higher than it had been over the last two fisheries (circa 1500 tonnes higher) and the TAC was not fully taken during the last two seasons.

Analysis of landings data identified that the average number of vessels operating within the fishery per day has reduced from 50-55 historically to 30-35 over the last two years. Modelling of the uptake of the TAC identifies that, based on historic activity levels, the TAC could be exhausted by the end of August. In contrast, if fishing activity reflects that over the last two fisheries, the TAC would not be exhausted until after February – essentially the fishery will not take the full TAC.

The main rationale provided against an increase in daily quota related to potential impacts on the price of cockles and potential impacts to cockle beds.

Whilst the Authority is conscious of economic impacts to the fishery, impacts of prices are considered to be a matter for markets and competition that the Authority avoids affecting. However, it could be argued that the overall economic 'impact' of increasing daily quotas (as a consequence of reduced £ per Kilo) is offset by the lost income from the fishery as a whole where the TAC is not taken.

It is also acknowledged that some vessels may not be capable of taking more than 2-tonnes per day due to their size and capacity. It is also true however that some larger vessels incur larger overheads and have previously referred to the 2-tonne daily quota as being less viable. The authority has a duty to 'balance the needs' of the different operators in the industry and both views are considered within the context of fisheries management measures.

With regards to impacts from excessive prop-washing and poor practice, the Code of Best Practice for the fishery expressly refers to limiting impacts of prop-washing by avoiding the creation of deep rings in the sediment. By way of deterrent, the Authority may consider closing beds where damage is considered to be excessive.

It is also noted that the TAC is based on an estimate of the total stock and that this includes a margin of error. In addition, the TAC does not always reflect how much cockle stock is actually available to the fishery because some of that stock will be at densities too low to viable remove through hand-working.

On balance, the Authority generally seeks to provide fishing opportunity where it can. In the case of the current fishery, this may include an increase in the

daily quota to facilitate the full TAC being taken and reserves the right to do so. Consideration of doing so during the course of the fishery will however take into account the potential economic impacts, the likelihood that the full TAC will be taken including the views of industry with regards to how much cockle stock is realistically available.

Conclusions

The consultation identified that there was broad agreement with the proposed management measures for the fishery. Further consideration of operating times (later in the year) and the daily quota will include consideration of the responses to this consultation. In addition, the Authority is seeking to establish a Wash Forum and it is intended that any decisions will also be informed by discussion with such during the course of the fishery.

Appendix 1 – Biosecurity measures in Hunstanton

Introduction

Cockle stocks in The Wash have suffered from mass die-off events (which were referred to as ‘atypical mortality’ since 2008). In 2024, analysis of new, and historic samples identified the presence of three pathogens which are strongly associated with contributing to these die-offs: a novel species of the *marteilila* parasite, a virus and disseminated haemocytic neoplasia (a form of cancer).

During the 2025 cockle fishery, fishers identified and prosecuted a ‘new’ cockle bed off Hunstanton. The cockles in this bed were typically larger and of higher quality compared to the cockle stock within the rest of the public fishery, and it is considered likely that this is likely a reflection of the environmental conditions in the area (notably the lower beds which provide enhanced feeding opportunities and the proximity to outlets of organic matter).

The presence / absence of *Marteilia* parasite at Hunstanton

Samples were taken from Hunstanton in February 2026 are being analysed by Cefas for the presence of the above diseases. The initial results have not identified *Marteilia* as being present and have found only low levels of the virus and neoplasia. However, further tests are needed to rule out the presence of *Marteilia* as the presence of pathogens is also known to often be very low during winter months. As such, the initial results do not rule out the presence of the diseases at Hunstanton.

Given that other species of *Marteilia* are known to spread via secondary hosts of the parasite at certain life stages which can float in the water column (including copepods and marine worms), and the presence of other Wash-based vessels at the site during the 2025 fishery, the likelihood that cockles at Hunstanton do not have the pathogen is considered to be very low, particularly as they managed to colonise most of the other beds in The Wash within a year or two of first being observed in 2008.

However, pending completion of the current analysis and further tests during warmer months, it cannot be ruled out that the area has avoided infection to the same extent as other beds in The Wash. One hypothesis is that the hydrology of The Wash is such that water from other infected beds does not flow over the Hunstanton site. The reality is however that without further information, there is no certainty as to whether the site contains the diseases or not.

Consideration of management options

If the site has avoided infection thus far due to local conditions, then presence of fishing vessels presents the primary potential vector for transmitting the diseases to Hunstanton. In the event that it is concluded that the bed does not have the diseases, allowing fishing activity without biosecurity measures presents a significant risk.

Development of effective biosecurity measures requires careful consideration with fishing industry and other experts. The ‘early’ opening of the fishery has required a conflated consultation and consideration period compared to other years and has not provided opportunity to consider the potential for biosecurity measures for this

reason. In addition, implementing such measures also represents a potential cost to fishing industry which would also need to be carefully considered. As such, additional time is required to carefully consider the matter.

Closure of the bed will reduce the risk of infection. However, the bed is likely to represent a significant fishing opportunity for the 2026 fishery.

Conclusion

Logically, it appears likely that the cockle stocks at Hunstanton include the infections thought to be responsible for 'atypical mortality'. However, initial test results have not conclusively identified whether or not *Marteilia* in particular is present. Further analysis of the February samples is ongoing and may provide further information on the matter but until then, there remains a risk that the bed is currently uninfected and that fishing activity will lead to infection of the area. Biosecurity measures may reduce the associated risk to an acceptable level but require careful consideration. To enable such consideration, which would include consultation with industry, the Hunstanton bed will not be open to the fishery. It is intended that this measure is temporary until such time as either suitable biosecurity measures have been identified and implemented, or further analysis, including of further samples, conclude the presence of the disease. At such time the need for the closure / biosecurity measures will be reviewed.