The Wash Mussel Fishery 2026 - Formal Consultation Outcome Document

This document presents the outcomes of the consultation on the revised 2026 Mussel Fishery permit conditions under the Wash Cockle and Mussel Byelaw 2021. The consultation ran from 21st September 2026 to 5th October 2026 and sought views on management measures, including those introduced on 31st July 2026 under the urgent provisions (paragraph 21 and 24) of the Wash Cockle and Mussel Byelaw 2021.

The key measures in the revised permit conditions included:

- **Opening of additional mussel beds** where 2025 surveys identified sufficient stock for harvesting and relaying fisheries, increasing fishing opportunities for permit holders.
- **Temporary closures to protect high risk seal haul out sites** on the North and South Mare Tail beds to the hand-worked fishery have been introduced to protect harbour seals and support the conservation objectives of The Wash and North Norfolk Coast SAC.
- **A requirement for Vessel Monitoring Systems** to be onboard vessels to assist with monitoring of activities and to support compliance with closed and open areas.

In addition to these measures, Eastern IFCA sought views on Total Allowable Catches (TACs), biosecurity requirements and the wider management of the Wash mussel fishery.

Eastern IFCA invited feedback on the continued implementation of these management measures and their potential impacts on the fishery. The responses received have been considered and are summarised within this document.

Consultation Outcome

There were no direct responses to the consultation; however, officers engaged with those actively participating in the mussel fishery to seek their views. The lack of direct response to the consultation is likely as a consequence of both the low level of fishing activity, with only one to two vessels operating in recent years, and the limited impacts resulting from the permits conditions. No concerns were raised regarding the management measures and engagement identified there had been no significant impacts which arose from their implementation. The fishery was considered low-intensity and largely self-regulating by stakeholders.

The main issue raised related to the potential relaxation of export restrictions and increased access to European markets in the future. It was noted that improved market

access has previously led to greater fishing activity and could increase fishing pressure on Wash mussel stocks.

Stakeholder feedback indicated that the mussel beds are in good condition, with strong levels of mussel seed and favourable sediment conditions supporting settlement and growth. There was satisfaction with the overall condition of the stocks. It was also acknowledged that the positive state of the fishery may, in part, reflect the effectiveness of the management of them.

Eastern IFCA Response

Since the harvestable and relaying mussel fisheries opened in 2025, uptake has remained low due to poor market conditions, with only one to two vessels actively participating. Consequently, the proposed TACs are considered low risk and are unlikely to be reached. The opening of additional mussel beds has increased opportunities and is seen as a benefit to maximise opportunity for those that are in the fishery and overfishing is not a risk given the limited number of permits held currently.

Eastern IFCA acknowledges concerns that access to European export markets could increase fishing pressure on Wash mussel stocks. However, access to the fishery is controlled through permit and eligibility requirements under the Wash Cockle and Mussel Byelaw 2021, which helps limit entry and manage future fishing effort. Management measures would be reviewed should such a situation arise.

Eastern IFCA will continue to monitor the fishery and review management measures to ensure the sustainability of mussel stocks. Annual stock assessments are nearing completion and will inform the setting of the 2027 TACs and any associated management measures. This evidence led approach ensures that management decisions are based on the best available scientific information and can be adapted in response to changes in stock status and fishery activity.

Assessment of Impacts

The Wash mussel fishery is a small scale fishery, with only one to two vessels actively operating. Given the low level of participation and limited fishing effort, the existing management measures, including seal closure areas, are considered to have not resulted in any significant financial impacts on permit holders.

Due to the small scale of the fishery and the limited number of active participants, it is not possible to reliably quantify the benefits. However the decision to open additional mussel beds was intended to increase fishing opportunities within the Wash which could have had a positive impact on the fishery.

All vessels currently participating in the fishery are already equipped with iVMS, therefore no additional costs associated with implementation were anticipated and have been seen. Impacts on the cockle fishery are also expected to be negligible, as

the fishery is nearing the end of the season and catches remain well below the mussel Total Allowable Catch (TAC).

Conclusions

Although there were no direct responses to the formal consultation, subsequent stakeholder engagement indicated that the revised permit conditions had no overall adverse impact on permit holders. Further, stakeholders considered the Wash mussel fishery to be low intensity and largely self-regulating. Nevertheless, continued dialogue between industry and officers remains important to support effective, adaptive management as new evidence becomes available.

The outcome of this consultation will inform a review of the emergency measures applied on the 31st July 2026 and a decision as to whether any further revisions are required.