

**NWIFCA Extraordinary Technical
Science and Byelaw Meeting
6th of March 2024: 10:00 a.m.**

**Agenda
Item
3**

NWIFCA COCKLE FISHERIES OPEN DATES – CONSULTATION RESULTS

Purpose:

To present the results of the NWIFCA consultation on the 2024/25 District cockle open season

Recommendation:

Committee members should consider the results of the consultation and decide whether to:

- a) Remain with the current cockle open season of 1st September to 30th of April for 2024/25; or
- b) To approve a trial open season of July 1st 2024 to February 28th 2025, following the plan laid out in section 5.

1. Background

At the TSB meeting on the 6th February, NWIFCA officers informed the Authority they would be undertaking stakeholder engagement regarding the 2024/25 District cockle open season. The purpose of the consultation was to gather the views of the main stakeholder group (Byelaw 3 Permit Holders and Buyers), to identify whether a change in the open season is suitable, and/or desirable by most stakeholders.¹

Consultation was opened on the 2nd February on the website and disseminated to stakeholders via social media and the Authority's text messaging service. As part of the consultation, stakeholders were given three options to participate; 1) by attending an in-person meeting where stakeholders had the opportunity to book timeslots to speak with officers directly. Three in-person events were held at Chester on 20th February, Southport on 21st February, and Carnforth on 22nd February; 2) stakeholders could participate by arranging to speak with an officer over the phone if they were unable to attend an event, and; 3) if stakeholders were unable to attend an event or speak via a call, they were able to answer the consultation questionnaire available on the website. Stakeholders were further contacted via email on the 22nd of February regarding the consultation and reminded via text message on the 19th of February.

Consultation closed on the 23rd February at 3pm.

All participants, whether in-person, over the phone or via the website, were asked to complete the questionnaire. The results of the consultation have been compiled and presented as aggregate data. The questionnaire is provided in Annex 1 of this report.

2. Participants

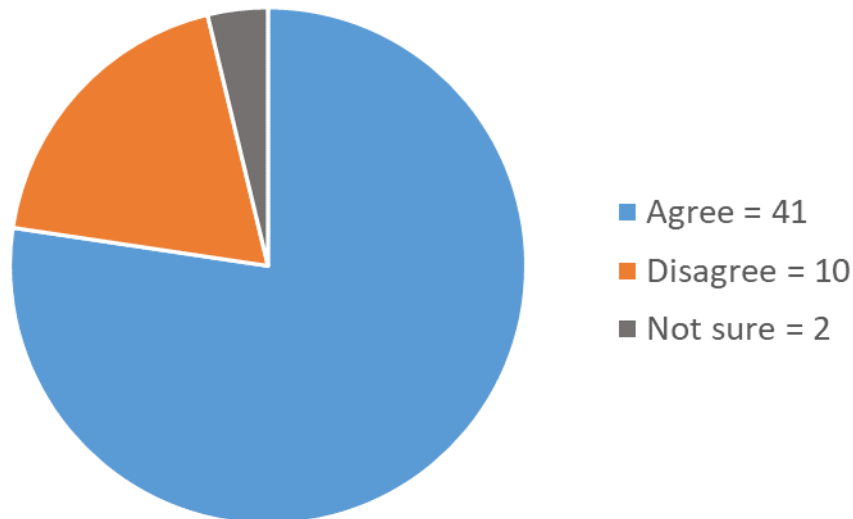
Out of 150 current permit holders, 53 responded to the survey either via the online questionnaire, through in-person meetings or via phone conversations.

¹ The consultation was open to anyone who wished to provide their views, however, the main stakeholder group was the target audience for the consultation, and indeed, only individuals from this group ended up responding.

Out of the 53 respondents 48 were Byelaw 3 permit holders, four were Byelaw 3 permit holders and buyers, and one was a buyer only. This represents approximately a third of the total stakeholder group.

3. Results

Question 1: The NWIFCA Districts cockle open season for 2024/25 should be from 1st July 2024 to 28th February 2025



Stakeholders were asked whether they agreed, disagreed or were not sure regarding question 1. Out of 53 respondents, 41 agreed (77%), ten disagreed (19%) and two (4%) were unsure.

Question 2: What is your reasoning for your answer?

Participants were asked to provide reasoning for their answer to Question 1. For analysis, the answers have been broken down into the main 'themes' consistently provided in responses to whether they agreed, disagreed or were not sure. This approach allows respondents to maintain anonymity while providing an overview to the Authority of the key reasons given by stakeholders.

The number of participants who referred to a specific theme in their answer is provided below. This number shows the frequency a theme was raised. Themes are ranked in order of how often they were mentioned.

Key themes for those who answered agree:

- 1. Safer working conditions, including references to better weather (19 / 41)**
Safer working conditions were referenced with regards to better weather and daylight availability as one of the main reasons for considering an earlier open season.
- 2. Better daylight hours (18 / 41)**
An earlier opening was associated with longer days in the summer, which was favourable as fishers could access more tides and were not limited by daylight – therefore, they would likely be more productive.
- 3. Better cockle meat yields (17 / 41)**
The meat in cockles was considered to be better in the earlier months and therefore potentially more profitable.
- 4. Better prices and more marketable stock (11 / 41)**

This theme was linked with better cockle yields, and the availability of cooking plants being open.

5. Coinciding with other UK fisheries. (9 / 41)

This was favourable for two main reasons, 1) other cooking plants were open and so stock was marketable, and 2) Effort would be spread among other UK fisheries for those with additional UK fishery permits.

6. Loss of the live market (5 / 41)

The loss of the live export market was noted as a reason move towards the cooked market. Additional concerns were raised regarding the lack of consistency in cockle classification, and therefore reliability of the live winter market.

7. Poor cockle yields in winter (4 / 41)

Key themes for disagree:

1. Coinciding with other fisheries. (4 / 10)

If the fishery was to open in July, it would coincide with other UK fisheries open times. The main reason provided for this being unfavourable was that the limited competition for buyers (from either other buyers or available markets) may drive down the price of cockle.

2. High fishing pressure (4 / 10)

If beds are opened in the summer, there is concern that high fishing pressure in the early months (due to more available tides and daylight hours) will shorten the main season, and it will not provide for a consistent fishery throughout the season as the bulk of the stock will be removed in the earlier months. Concerns were also raised regarding the sustainability of a summer fishery compared with a winter fishery, in relation to both the pressure and the incentive to riddle stock effectively. Live market cockle incurs a fine during exporting if found to be undersize.

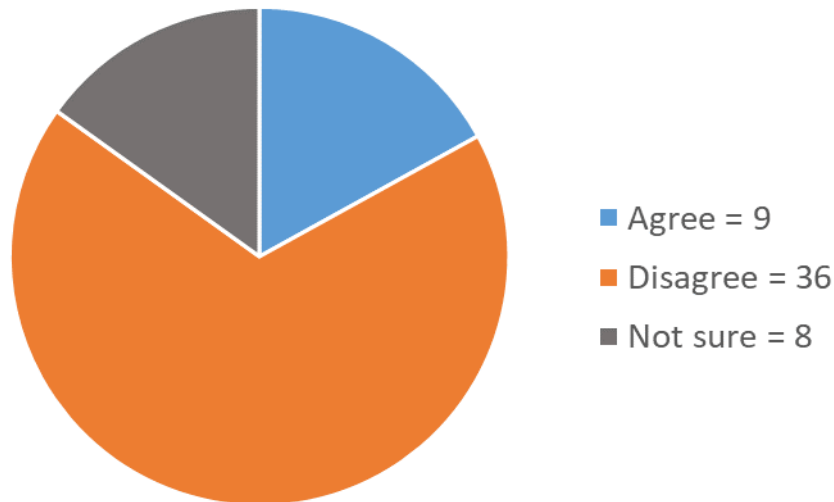
3. Good winter live markets (3 / 10)

Price of cockle for live export is high, and some beds are A classification during the winter period. This can provide for a consistent fishery.

Key themes for not sure:

Given the low number of individuals who responded as unsure, it is difficult to pick out 'key themes' for this response. However, the main reasoning for those who were unsure as to whether to agree to the statement related to the concern over 1) coinciding UK fisheries could drive down the price of cockle, and 2) the winter market for classified cockle is good.

Question 3: The NWIFCA Districts cockle open season for 2024/25 should be from 1st September 2024 to 30th April 2025



Stakeholders were asked whether they agreed, disagreed or were not sure regarding Question 3. Out of 53 respondents, nine agreed (17%), 36 disagreed (68%) and eight (15%) were unsure.

Question 4: What is your reasoning for your answer?

As previously, participants were asked to provide reasoning for their answer to the question. The answers have been broken down into the main themes consistently raised in responses. The number of participants who referred to a specific theme in their answer is provided below. This number helps to give an indication of the frequency in which a theme was raised.

Themes are ranked in order of how often they were mentioned.

Key themes for those who answered agree:

- 1. Leaving the fishery to September allows the beds to reach size (3 / 9)**
There was concern among respondents that the stock may not reach size by July, and it was important to allow them to reach size.
- 2. The current season works (3 / 9)**
Comment was also made that the winter fishery has allowed for a consistent living and as an alternative to other fisheries during a period where weather may stop other fishing opportunities.
- 3. There is a good winter fishery (3 / 9)**
Classified beds can go for live export which gets a better price.

Key themes for those who answered disagree:

- 1. Working conditions in the winter months are not as safe or favourable (including references to weather conditions) (14 / 36)**
There is a limited amount of time for fishing as daylight decreases towards the autumn and winter months. Weather conditions can also make undesirable or unsafe working conditions.
- 2. Limited daylight (11 / 36)**
Less time to access the beds results in lower productivity.
- 3. Lower meat yields in the winter (9 / 36)**

4. Loss of the live market (6 / 36)

Difficult to get orders in winter unless beds are classified. This can be unpredictable.

5. Worth a trial (5 / 36)

Respondents felt that given the changing market and stock conditions it may be worth trialling a new open season.

A small number of respondents disagreed with the statement based on preferring an early opening, but retaining the winter fishery closure of April 30th.

Key themes for those who answered not sure:

1. Different opening times to the ones proposed should be considered (4 / 8)

Respondents proposed different opening times that would allow for different beds in the District to have different opening times and maintain a winter fishery. Comment was made regarding the need to apply management differently across the beds as they have different requirements. Other comments referred to the need to have all beds open all year, or before June.

2. Live markets are important (3 / 8)

Live markets are an important source of income or additional opportunity.

Question 5: Please provide any further information you think is important for the Authority to consider on this matter.

Respondents were asked to provide any information they thought important to the Authority. Final comments from stakeholders typically referenced management of the fishery should it take place, and concerns around securing a sustainable, consistent fishery.

The responses have been summarised by common themes and ranked in order of how often they were mentioned:

1. Limitations on tides (17 / 53)

Many responses referred to the need to reduce the number of available tides during the fishery. A one tide per day fishery would prevent the large bulk of the stock being removed over a short period, and stretch out the fishery.

2. No limitation (either regarding tides, TAC or openings) (7 / 53)

A number of respondents mentioned the need for no limitation on either, quotas, days of the week or timing of the year.

In addition, the importance of a sustainable and consistent fishery was referenced by many of the respondents, though it was linked to a number of differing recommendations regarding how to achieve this (ie. through a sustained winter fishery, or prolonged summer fishery). The most consistent factor linked to this was the use of limitation on tides, and a TAC (5 / 53).

The Authority was also asked to consider how respondents who hold additional UK cockle fishery permits might vote in comparison to those without.

4. Summary

1. 53 out of 150 permit holders and additional stakeholders provided feedback during consultation.

2. Out of the 53 respondents, 77% agreed, 19% disagreed and 4% were unsure, with the proposal to open the fishery in July and closing in February.

3. The main reasoning for those who agreed related to:

- a. **safer working conditions** due to daylight and weather,
 - b. **additional daylight** providing more time for fishing,
 - c. **better cockle yields** and therefore prices,
 - d. the **loss of the live markets**, and,
 - e. the timing of other **UK fisheries**.
4. The main reasoning for those who **disagreed** related to:
 - a. the **importance of the live market in winter**,
 - b. the concern that if all **UK cockle fisheries** are open at a similar time, the **price of cockle may be reduced**,
 - c. and that the more daylight hours available earlier in the summer may result in the **stocks being heavily fished early** on and **preventing the fishery sustaining** through the rest of the season.
 5. Individuals who responded not sure provided similar answers relating to the concern over all UK cockle fisheries being open at the same time and that the live market in winter was important.
 6. **Out of 53 respondents, 17% agreed, 68% disagreed and 15% were unsure with the proposal to remain with the current fishing season of September to April.**
 7. The main reason for those who **agreed** related to:
 - a. Allowing **time for cockles to reach size**
 - b. The **current season works well**
 - c. The **importance of the winter fishery**
 8. The main reasons for those who **disagreed** related to:
 - a. **Working conditions unfavourable**
 - b. **Shorter daylight**
 - c. **Lower yields**
 - d. **Loss of the live market**
 - e. **Openness to trialling a new approach**
 9. The main reason for those who were **unsure** related to:
 - a. The **importance of the live markets**
 - b. Preferring **different opening times than those proposed**.
 10. In the additional information provided, **17 out of the 53 respondents referenced the need for tide limits** on a fishery.

5. NWIFCA cockle open season plan and justification

In the case where the Authority agrees to change the open season in 2024/25 to the 1st July to 28th February, officers have developed a plan to implement this potential change.

The plan aims to balance the potential risks of survey and resource requirements, with providing for an early fishery.

This plan was previously discussed at the TSB meeting on the 6th February. The plan is presented again to receive approval in the event the open season for 2024/25 is voted to be changed.

The following explains the proposed approach and reasoning for this:

Opening the cockle fishery earlier than the 1st September (Byelaw 3 para 13) requires a change to the survey timings.

For the fishery to be opened by July, surveys need to be carried out April to May to allow for analysis and HRA submission before the 1st July.

Cockles typically grow fastest during the summer months, the earlier in the season they are surveyed, the less time they have to reach size. A sufficient biomass of size cockle must be reached for the fishery to be opened (currently determined as equivalent to previous years the fishery has been opened).

The concern is that if surveys are undertaken in April/May determine that size cockle biomass is not of sufficient quantities then the fishery will be recommended to be closed. Under these circumstances, it is likely a second survey will be required to determine if the fishery could be opened by 1st September.

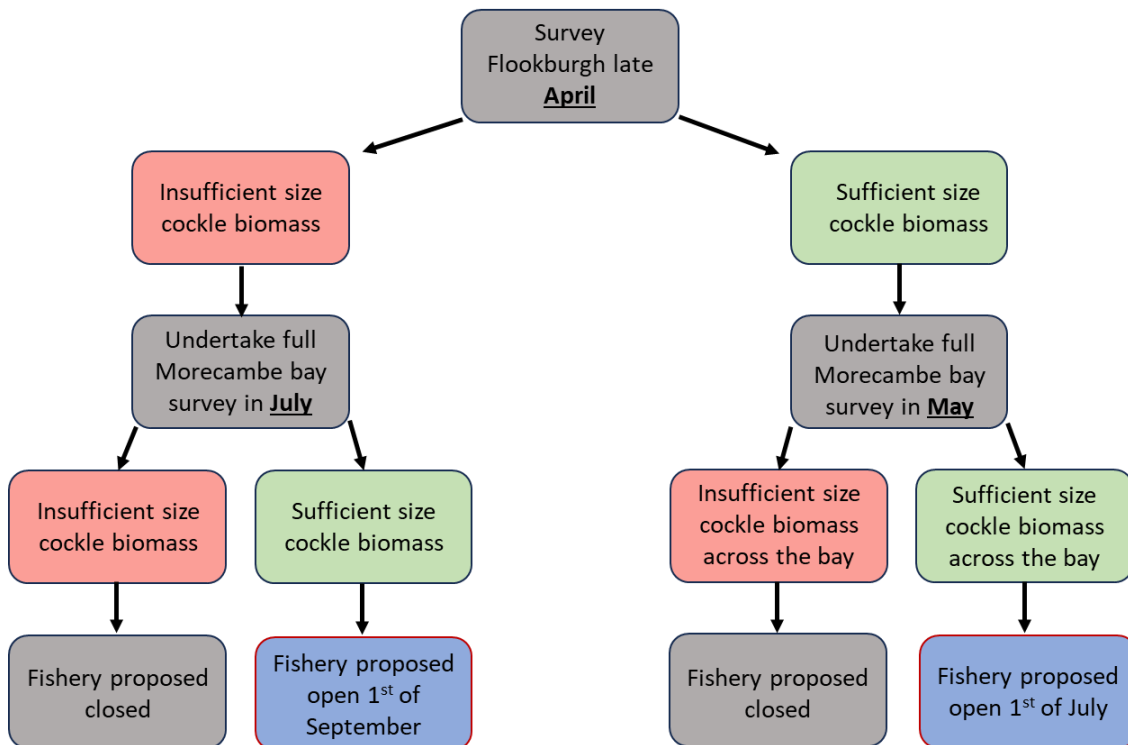
Given that Leasowe and Southport look highly unlikely to reach size by July 1st, these beds are proposed to retain their main survey in July for assessment in September.

Surveying the entirety of Morecambe Bay requires significant officer time and resource for sampling over 500 sample points across 7,700 ha.

To reduce the risk of undertaking two full surveys, officers propose the following:

- 1) to undertake a full survey of only Flookburgh cockle bed in April. Flookburgh is the largest cockle bed, with 2023 results showing large proportions of 15-20 mm cockle which is likely to grow to size during the summer of 2024. Officers will analyse the results, and if this bed has reached sufficient size biomass by April, officers will then conduct a full Morecambe Bay survey (Leven, Pilling, Aldingham and Newbiggin, Warton, and Middleton). A recommendation for the fishery will be made in June, for a 1st July open date.
- 2) If, however, the stocks do not look to have grown to size on Flookburgh, further surveys will be postponed until July. Officers will survey all Morecambe Bay cockle beds (including Flookburgh for the second time), with the aim of bringing a proposal to TSB in August, for opening on 1st September and would close May 1st.
- 3) If the fishery is opened in July, it will be closed two months earlier (i.e. February 28th rather than May 1st)

Summary of the decision matrix:



Deviating from the standard approach to opening the fishery poses certain risks which the Authority and members of industry must consider e.g. surveying earlier in the season risks lower biomass estimates.

The proposed plan balances these risks (e.g. officer time lost to extensive repeated surveys vs closure of a fishery which would otherwise be opened in September), but there are still scenarios which may cause difficulties. For example, survey results in April may be borderline, and subsequent early surveying of Morecambe Bay may still determine insufficient size biomass.

If the trial open season is agreed, but an early opening is not possible this year (due to stocks, or other unforeseen circumstances), we will revert to the standard open season as outlined in Byelaw 3. We would then look to undertake the trial open season for the following year (e.g 2025/26 season).

Annex 1

NWIFC CONSULTATION QUESTIONNAIRE – COCKLE FISHERY OPEN SEASON

24/25



At the TSB meeting on the 15th of August, NWIFCA Officers were asked to look into a change in the cockle fishery open season dates.

Currently the NWIFCA Cockle fishing season runs from the 1st of September to the 31st of April (Byelaw 3, paragraph 13.) The new proposal is for the 2024/25 season to run from the 1st of July 2024 to the 28th of February 2025.

The purpose of this questionnaire is to gain stakeholder feedback on this proposal.

Please note that any change proposed would be temporary and will only apply to the 2024/25 cockle open season.

1. Please select one of the following that best describes your relation to the fishery:

Byelaw 3 permit holder

Buyer

Other

Byelaw 3 permit holder and buyer

- **Name and or permit number:**

2. The NWIFCA Districts cockle open season for 2024/25 should be from July 1st 2024 to February 28th 2025

Agree

Disagree

Not sure

3. What is your reasoning for your answer to question 3?

4. The NWIFCA Districts cockle open season for 2024/25 should be from September 1st 2024 to April 30th 2025

Agree

Disagree

Not sure

5. What is your reasoning for your answer to question 5?

6. Please provide any further information you think is important for the Authority to consider on this matter.