

Coquet to St Mary's MCZ

Management Plan Development Timeline

2024 Timeline

March 2024 – Initial Assessment and Committee Review

NIFCA's Technical & Scientific (T&S) Sub-Committee reviewed the MCZ assessment. At the time, trawl exemptions were granted without limits on permit numbers or activity levels. The committee concluded that further management was needed and agreed to form a working group.

May 2024 – Working Group Deliberations

The group included industry representatives, researchers, and experts in trawling impact modelling (using the Benthic Impacts Tool). They concluded:

- Current trawling may be undermining conservation objectives.
- BIT results suggest ~50% of the mud habitat is significantly degraded.
- Concerns were raised about impacts on sensitive species like seapens.

The group recommended further evidence collection, adaptive management, and a trial of semi-pelagic otter boards.

June 2024 – Options and Recommendations

Three options were considered:

Option	Summary	Recommendation
1. Do nothing	Maintain current management	Not preferred; lacks control over activity levels or number of exemptions
2. Adaptive management	Introduce permit conditions such as caps, thresholds, and spatial restrictions	Preferred ; allows for balanced, flexible management
3. Prohibition	Ban all mobile gear	Not preferred; disproportionate if objectives can be met through other means

The T&S Committee recommended a modified Option 2, including:

- Annual activity cap (monitored via vessel tracking system and gear sensors)
- Spatial restrictions for sensitive species
- Consideration of permit caps and a flexible sunset clause

However, members opposed a fixed sunset clause due to concerns about future access.

July 2024 – Authority Decision

The full Authority agreed to pursue Option 2 without a sunset clause.

Legal Advice

In October 2024, legal advice confirmed:

- Exemptions under the byelaw are discretionary.
- Conditions can be applied to exemptions, including gear tracking requirements.
- Exemptions may be revoked if necessary to meet statutory duties.

Stakeholder Engagement

All relevant trawl permit holders ($\leq 12m$ vessels) were emailed with details. Three responses were received with the following concerns:

- General reduced catch rates.
- Questioned the need for new management and the 2022 reference year.
- Concerns about new entrant exclusion, tracking costs, and evidence of feature damage.

All feedback led to follow-up meetings, and concerns were shared with members for consideration.

December 2024 – Final Committee Review

The T&S Committee finalised the plan, including:

1. **Vessel Tracking:** Agreement on tracking system and additional gear sensors (costs covered by NIFCA)
2. **Exemptions:** Track record (2022) required for eligibility
3. **Activity Threshold:** Based on 2022 as the best evidence year

A sunset clause and spatial restrictions were not taken forward at this stage due to legal limitations.

January 2025 – Final Approval

The full Authority approved the management plan with the following provisions:

Exemption Criteria

- Valid NIFCA trawl permit (vessel $\leq 12m$)
- Proven track record in 2022 (exemption returns or iVMS)
- Functional vessel tracking system with gear sensors

Activity Cap

Based on 2022 data (1104 trawling hours), a cap of **1000 hours** is set for 2025.

Monitoring & Control Plan (M&C Plan)

To be developed with Natural England, the M&C Plan will:

- Monitor annual trawling hours and spatial intensity
- Compare 2025 activity to the 2022 baseline
- Support additional evidence gathering, including the semi-pelagic otter board trial

Results may inform future management changes. Semi-pelagic doors, which reduce seabed contact, are pending manufacture. Their trial could significantly influence future mitigation measures.

Review

This plan is valid for one year and will be reviewed for 2026. NIFCA will use new activity data, impact research, and industry input to determine if adjustments are needed to meet conservation objectives.

Feedback from the fishing industry is encouraged.

2025 Timeline

January 2025

- The NIFCA Authority formally agreed the Fisheries Management Plan for 2025.

February–March 2025

- All eligible vessels were fitted with GPS trackers and gear sensors.
- An analytical method was developed for calculating and recording the number of hours fished within the site.
- The Technical and Scientific Committee received an update on progress with the management plan and feedback from the fishing industry regarding its implementation.
- The Committee agreed that summaries of Technical and Scientific meetings would be published on the NIFCA website.

June–July 2025

- NIFCA commissioned a research project to detect impacts of trawling across a gradient of fishing pressure, informed by updated footprint and activity intensity data from iVMS.
- The study indicated potential impacts on benthic communities; however, confidence in the findings was low due to limitations in the study design.

August 2025

- Engagement with the fishing industry continued through an in-person meeting at the NIFCA office and follow-up individual correspondence.
- Feedback from industry representatives was anonymised, summarised, and provided to Authority members to inform decision-making.

October 2025

- The Technical and Scientific Committee reviewed the commissioned trawl-impact study alongside stakeholder feedback.
- A range of management options was considered, from maintaining the current plan to a full prohibition of trawling within the site.
- The Committee concluded that there was insufficient evidence to justify a change to the existing management plan and requested a full review of the evidence base used in its development.
- A subsequent meeting in October examined the full evidence set. Members discussed fishing activity in relation to the site's conservation objectives and agreed to retain the existing management measures while collecting further evidence on potential impacts.
- These recommendations were formally agreed at a meeting of the full Authority at the end of October.

November 2025

- The Fisheries Management Plan was updated for 2026, with measures remaining unchanged from 2025.
- Revised communications were prepared and issued to key stakeholders.