



Inshore Fisheries and
Conservation Authority

Review of the Byelaw 4

Whelk Flexible Permit Conditions

2026



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1. Summary

This report presents a review of the flexible permit conditions applied to the NWIFCA district's whelk fishery under NWIFCA Bylaw 4 (Potting Permit Bylaw). This review focuses specifically on the effectiveness and appropriateness of two current key flexible permit conditions:

- (a) *Category One Permits will only be issued to an applicant who fulfils the track record requirements of fishing for whelks as defined by the Technical, Science and Byelaw Sub-Committee of the Authority, and will be limited to the number of pots which can be fished (paragraph 1 (c)).*
- (c) *A Category One permit holder may fish with a maximum of:*
 - i. *1,000 pots for a vessel with track record; or*
 - ii. *400 pots for an under 10 metre vessel with no track record in the district.*

The purpose of this review is to determine whether these conditions remain suitable considering current fishing activity, landings data, stakeholder feedback and the policy direction set by the national Whelk Fisheries Management Plan (FMP). It will investigate whether there is evidence to support reopening the fishery to additional permit holders, or amending the existing pot limits, and the potential risks associated with any such changes.

Mandatory monthly whelk return data since 2022 has been analysed to assess trends in effort, landings and landings per unit effort (LPUE) across the district. This evidence is supplemented by a stakeholder consultation undertaken between November 2025 and January 2026, and a review of management approaches adopted in other IFCA districts and neighbouring jurisdictions.

The analysis shows that while overall effort and landings increased rapidly since 2022 and the introduction of the byelaw, participation has since declined, with only three active permit holders remaining in 2026. Stakeholder responses showed support for maintaining effort controls to protect stock sustainability, alongside mixed views regarding increased access and higher pot limits. The national Whelk FMP further reinforces the need for effort-based management and highlights the risk of localised depletion from uncontrolled expansion.

The available evidence indicates that the current flexible permit conditions remain appropriate for controlling fishing effort within the district's whelk fishery. Analysis of LPUE suggests that while the fishery remains productive, declining catch efficiency in recent years and the precautionary guidance set out in the national Whelk FMP support the need to avoid any overall increase in fishing pressure. It is therefore recommended that applications for a permit are reopened on a limited basis, subject to a district-wide cap on total authorised pots. This allows additional permits to be issued while

maintaining effective control of effort, safeguarding stock and enabling adaptive management.

This report provides the evidence used by officers to form the recommendation to Authority members of whether to retain, amend or expand the existing flexible permit conditions to ensure the long-term sustainable management of the whelk fishery within the district.

2. Background

Byelaw 4 (Potting Permit Byelaw) came into force on 6th June 2022. The main purpose of the byelaw was to bring in unified management to the entirety of the NWIFCA district, in particular with regards to the whelk fishery. This was needed because the legacy Cumbria Sea Fisheries Committee (CSFC) byelaw had unintentionally precluded whelk fishing in its district (the northern portion of the current district), which NWIFCA wanted to rectify. This preclusion was due to the CSFC byelaw requiring all pots to have escape gaps for edible crab and lobsters, preventing the use of whelk pots within that portion of the district.

To manage fishing effort, Byelaw 4 introduced pot limitations: 1,000 pots for fishers with a track record, and 400 pots for those without a track record and operating from an under 10m vessel. These pot limitations were developed through consultation with other management organisations, commercial fishers and officers.

Informal consultation with industry on the proposed pot limitations and track record criteria was undertaken in November 2018 through a questionnaire taken to in-person events, contacting those stakeholders on our correspondence list and via the website. Most industry respondents from the informal consultation agreed with the 1,000-pot limit for those with a track record and agreed with the track record requirements to restrict the number of permits.

To establish track record, whelk fishers had to have a minimum of five tonnes of whelk landings recorded between 2015 and 2018 from within specified areas as shown in Figure 1 and defined below.

- 0-6nm in ICES rectangles 35E7, 36E6, 36E7, 37E7 and those parts of ICES rectangles 35E6 and 37E6 that fall within the old North Western SFC district.
- 6-12nm in ICES rectangle 37E6.
- Those areas outside of the CSFC district in 38E6.

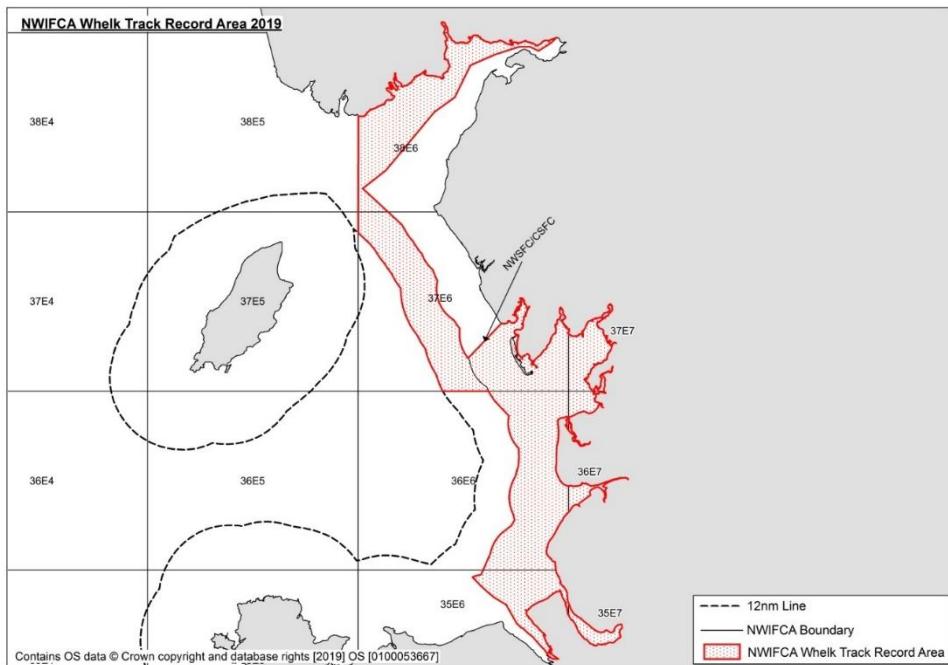


Figure 1. Whelk track record area within the NWIFCA district used in 2019.

This approach recognised that fishers operating within the legacy CSFC area of the district would not have had the ability to build a track record under the previous byelaw. Consequently, landings from the 6-12nm waters outside NWIFCA's jurisdiction were also considered and the duration over which landings could have been obtained was increased.

Over the past two decades, whelks have become one of the UK's most economically important fisheries, as increasing demand from abroad, near year-round availability of stock and low start-up costs make it a popular fishing option. The UK industry has expanded rapidly. In 2018, whelks made up nearly a quarter of all shellfish landed by under 10 metre vessels (MMO, 2018), with both the volumes and value of whelk increasing. It is important that suitable flexible permit conditions are determined to help protect stocks.

This report aims to review the whelk flexible permit conditions by analysing landings data, reviewing questionnaire responses to the recent consultation and considering relevant national policy and management frameworks to determine whether the current flexible permit conditions are most appropriate for the whelk fishery in the NWIFCA district.

3. Current Status

NWIFCA whelk permit holders are required, as a condition of their permit, to submit monthly return forms detailing fishing activity within the district, including nil returns where no fishing has taken place. This requirement has been in place since the introduction of the byelaw in June 2022.

NWIFCA therefore holds a continuous dataset covering the whelk fishery since June 2022. These returns provide information on permitted vessels' monthly whelk landings, number of pots set and hauled, and spatial patterns of fishing activity. This dataset provides a valuable indication of fishing effort and intensity within the whelk fishery over time and allows NWIFCA to monitor the whelk stock.

3.1 Fishing Effort

At the time the permitting scheme was developed, it was anticipated that a significantly higher number of vessels (~30) might apply for a whelk permit, due to the number of vessels already fishing whelks, initial interest and those that had fished the track record areas. Although a greater number of vessels were eligible for the 400-pot limit, many did not take up a permit. In addition, three vessel owners subsequently withdrew their applications due to the sale of their vessels. As a result, overall participation in the fishery was lower than originally expected.

Figure 2 shows the total number of whelk permits issued each permit year from 2022/23 to 2025/26. Permit numbers declined from seven in 2022/23 to five in 2023/24, then remained stable at five in 2024/25, and decreased to four in 2025/26. At the introduction of the permitting scheme permits were issued to seven vessels, four vessels with a 1,000-pot limit and three vessels with a 400-pot limit. This resulted in a total pot allocation of 5,200 pots across the NWIFCA district. Since the start of 2026 there are now only three whelk permit holders within the district. Of the three permit holders, two operate under the 1,000-pot allocation and one under the 400-pot allocation.

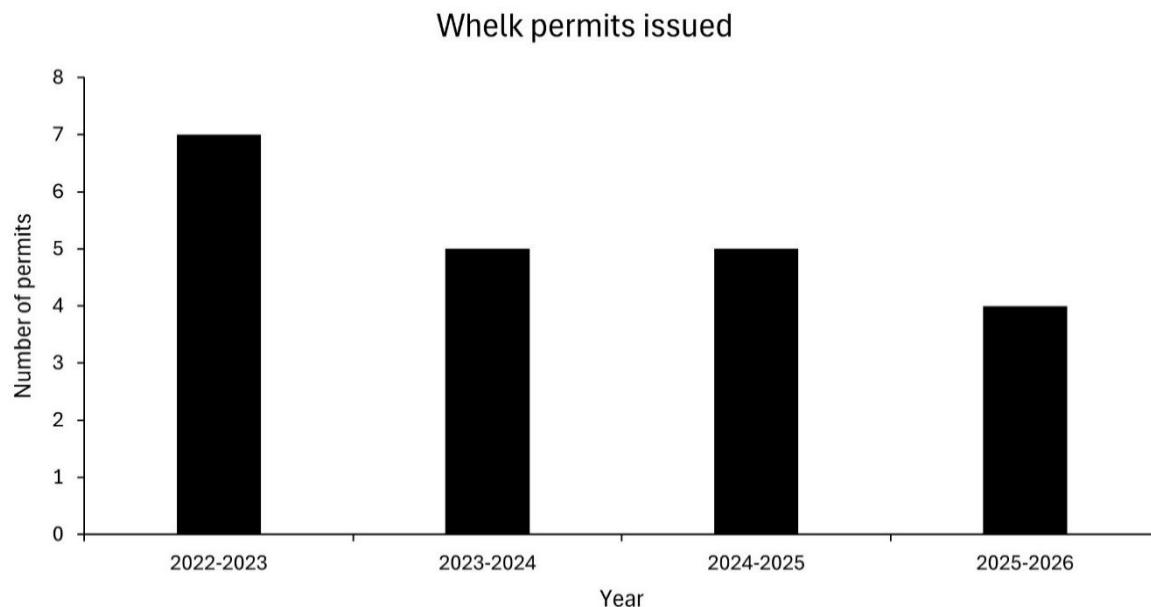


Figure 2. Number of whelk permits issued each permit year within the NWIFCA district (Since January 2026 it has gone down to 3 permit holders total).

Figure 3 shows the annual fishing activity between 2022 and 2025 by showing the days fisher per year. The first permits were issued in 2022. Not all permit holders fished that year and those that did only started in August 2022. Fishing activity for 2023, 2024 and 2025 remained similar. In 2022, fishing effort was minimal at just 10 days. This then increased in 2023 to 121 days showing a significant increase in participation. Effort continued to grow in 2024 reaching a peak of 143 days, before reducing to 130 days in 2025. The graph shows overall there has been minor variation in fishing effort.

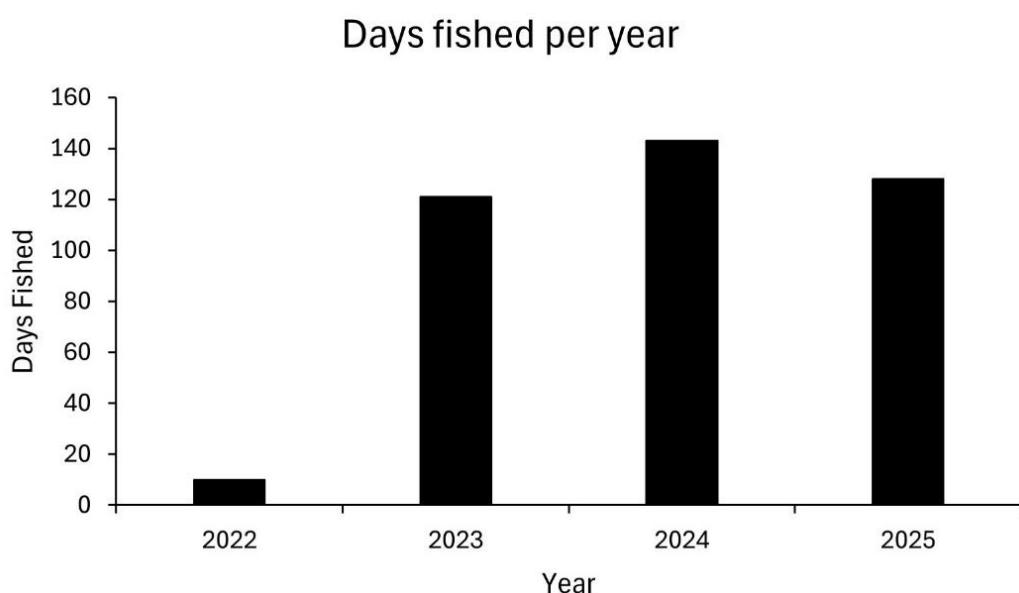


Figure 3. Annual fishing activity from 2022 until 2025. The graph shows the total number of days fished each year between 2022 and 2025. The vertical axis represents days fished.

Fishing effort data, measured as the total number of pots hauled annually, was analysed across four ICES rectangles (35E6, 36E6, 37E6 and 38E6) (see Figure 4) within the NWIFCA district between 2022 and 2025 (see Figure 5). An increase in total effort is shown between 2022 and 2024. With total pots hauled in 2022 rising from 3,200 to 59,896 in 2023 and the peak effort in 2024 at 95,380 pots hauled. This surge in effort was primarily due to increased activity in 37E6, which led to the pronounced spike in 2024. Fishing effort in 35E6, 36E6 and 38E6 displayed more gradual year-on-year changes. In 2025 there was a slight decline in total effort to 86,239 pots hauled.

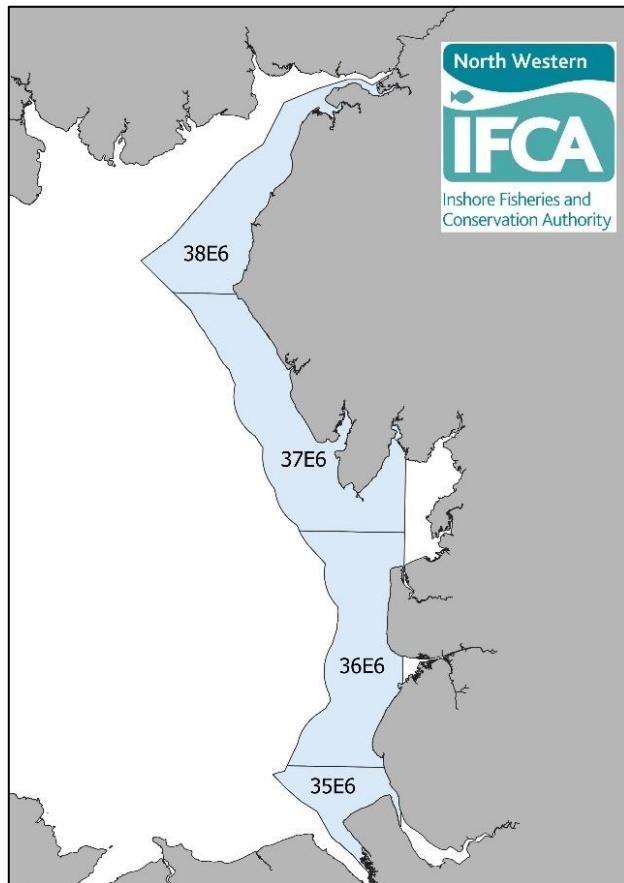


Figure 4. The locations of the four ICES rectangles (38E6, 37E6, 36E6 and 35E6) within the North Western IFCA district.

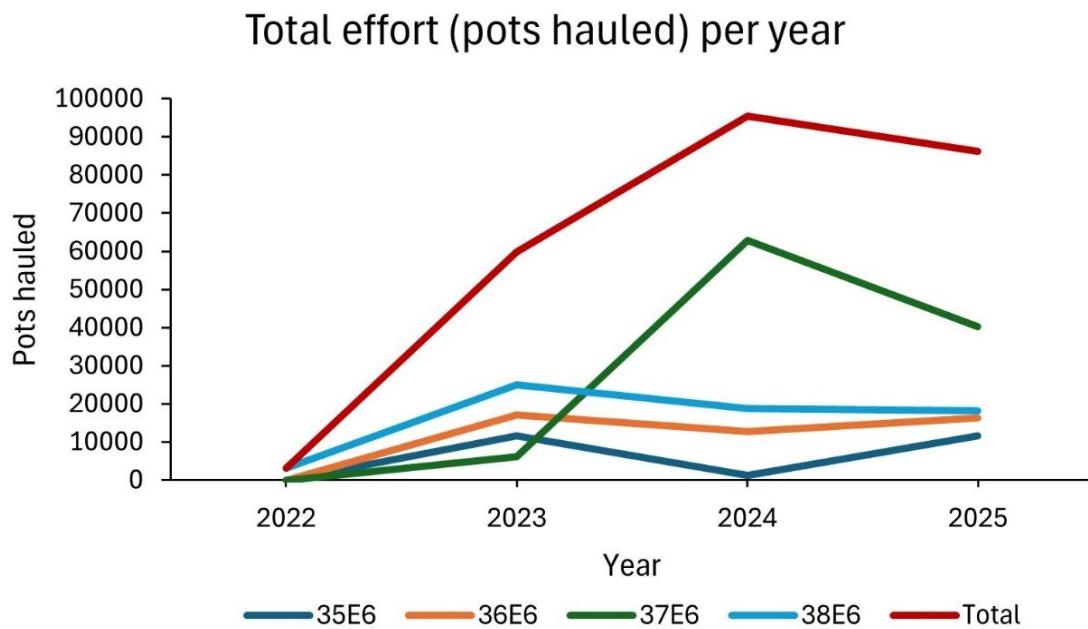


Figure 5. Total annual effort (annual number of pots hauled) across the four ICES rectangles (35E6, 36E6, 37E6, 38E6) within the NWIFCA district from 2022 until 2025. Each ICES is represented by a different coloured line, with the red line indicating the overall total effort.

3.2 Landing data

Figure 6 shows the total whelk landings within the NWIFCA district from 2022 to 2025. The graph shows an increase in landings from 5.2 tonnes in 2022 to 164.3 tonnes in 2023 and a peak of 262.2 tonnes in 2024, followed by a decline to 195.9 tonnes in 2025. The peak in 2024 correlates with the highest recorded effort in Figure 5.

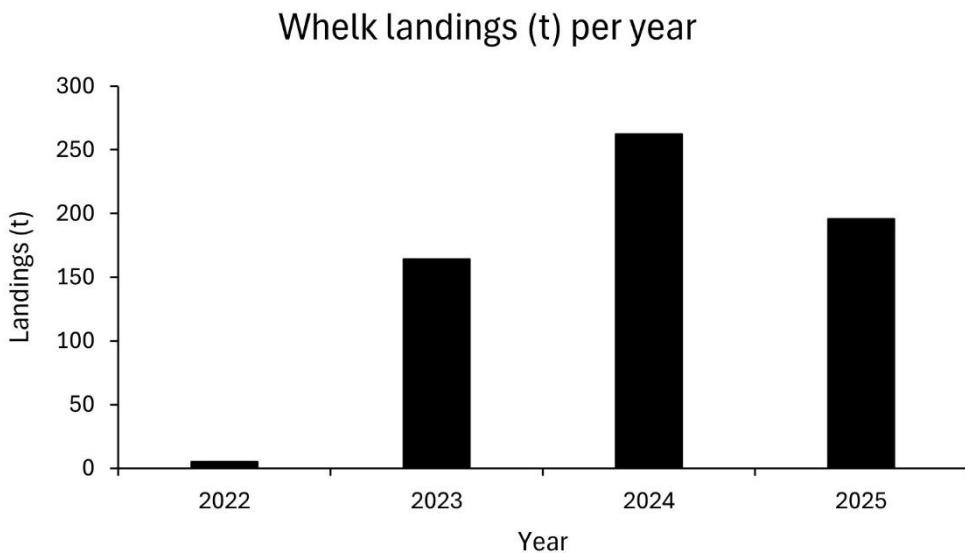


Figure 6. Annual whelk landings (tonnes) within the NWIFCA district from 2022 to 2025.

Figure 7 shows that the surge was mainly due to the increased landings in ICES rectangle 37E6 (green line) which contributed most significantly to the 2024 peak. The other ICES rectangles (35E6, 36E6 and 38E6) show more gradual changes over the years, contributing steadily to the overall totals.

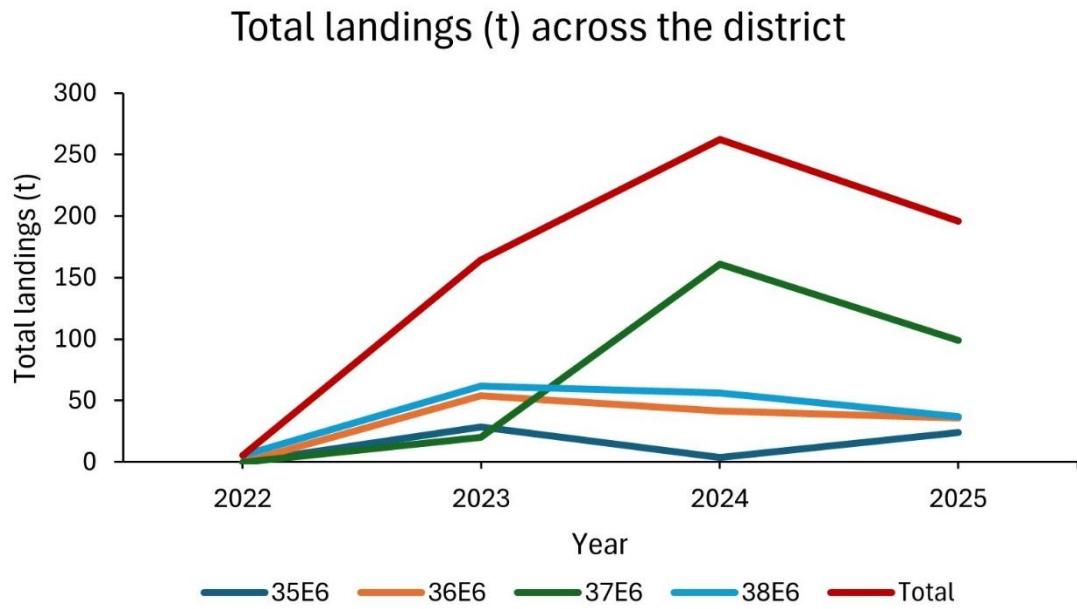


Figure 7. Total annual whelk landings (tonnes) across the four ICES rectangles (35E6, 36E6, 37E6 and 38E6) within the NWIFCA district from 2022 to 2025. Each ICES rectangle is represented by a different colour, with the red line indicating the overall total landings.

3.3 LPUE

LPUE has been used as an indicator of relative catch efficiency within the whelk fishery. It is calculated by dividing total landings by the total number of pots hauled and provides a measure of stock availability in relation to fishing effort. While LPUE does not represent a direct assessment of stock status, stable LPUE values are generally associated with sustainable fishing pressure, whereas declines may indicate increasing pressure on the stock.

Figure 8 shows annual LPUE across the four ICES rectangles within the NWIFCA district between 2022 and 2025, alongside the overall district-wide LPUE. LPUE increased across all ICES rectangles between 2022 and 2023; this coincided with increased fishing activity following the introduction of the permit scheme. From 2023 to 2025, the LPUE value remained above 2kg.

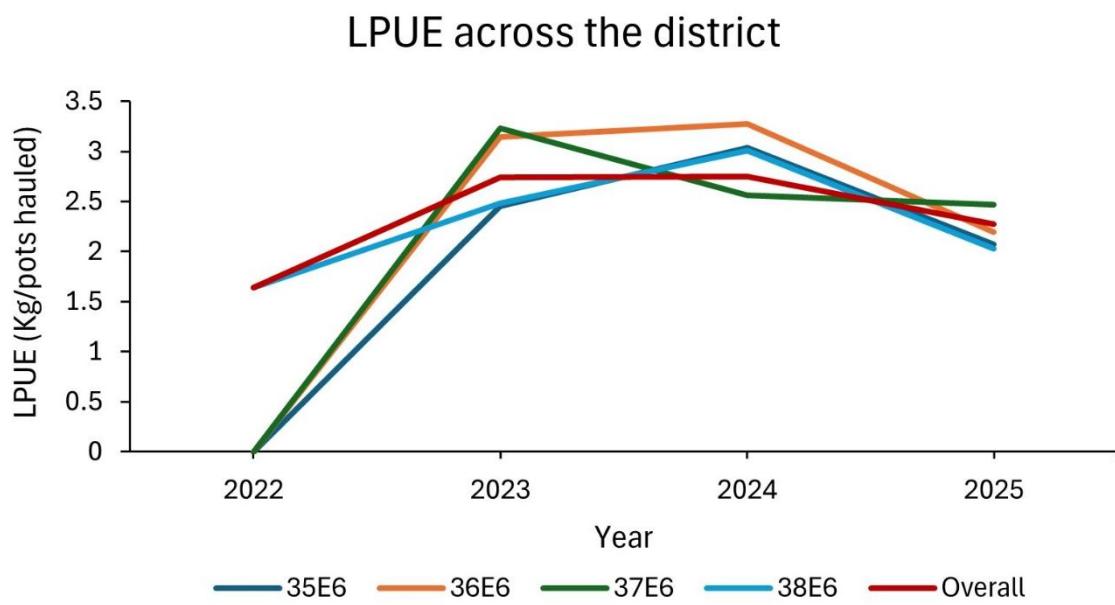


Figure 8. Annual LPUE across the four ICES rectangles (35E6, 36E6, 37E6 and 38E6) within the NWIFCA district from 2022 to 2025. Each ICES rectangle is represented by a different colour, with the red line indicating the overall district-wide LPUE.

The highest LPUE values were observed in 36E6, which peaked in 2024. Elevated LPUE was also recorded in 37E6 during 2023. From 2024 to 2025, LPUE declined across all ICES rectangles, including the district-wide LPUE.

4. Review of Other Whelk Fisheries

Table 1 shows a review of the pot limitations in place across all other IFCAAs as well as NWIFCA's neighbouring jurisdictions of Isle of Man and Wales. There is considerable variation in both pot limits and minimum conservation reference sizes (MCRSs). Several IFCAAs have introduced effort controls through permitting and pot limitations, although the approach differs widely between districts. In some regions there is little or no significant whelk fishery while others operate defined pot limits ranging from 300 to 1,000 pots per vessel. The variation in pot limitations reflects the difference in stock pressures, fleet structures and local management.

Table 1. Summary of whelk management measures in other IFCAAs and neighbouring jurisdictions.

Organisation	Management measure in place	MCRS
Cornwall IFCA	No management as not a significant fishery	45mm
Devon and Severn IFCA	No pot limit apart from voluntary code in Lyme Bay Reserve of 500-pot limit	65mm
Eastern IFCA	500-pot limit	55mm
Isle of Scilly IFCA	Not a significant fishery. Recreational pot limit of 6 pots per person	45mm
Kent and Essex IFCA	300-pot limit	53mm
North Eastern IFCA	Not a significant fishery. Recreational pot limit of 10 pots per person	45mm
Northumberland IFCA	800-pot limit	45mm
Southern IFCA	A pot limit has been proposed – currently in development	45mm
Sussex IFCA	300-pot limit within 3nm, 600-pot limit in 0-6nm	45mm
Isle of Man	1,000-pot limit of which no more than 400 can be set within the 0-3nm zone	75mm
Wales	No pot limit. Instead, an annual catch limit for the entire permitted fleet. Set at 4,529 tonnes for 2025/26 (until 28 th February 2026).	65mm

5. Consultation

A consultation was undertaken with stakeholders to inform the future flexible permit conditions relating to whelk potting under Byelaw 4. The consultation sought to address three key questions:

1. Is there demand for additional whelk permits within the district, and if so, what is the scale of fishing effort from potential new applicants?
2. Has there been a decline in permit renewals, and what are the factors influencing continued participation in the fishery?
3. What are stakeholders' views on existing pot limitations at both individual vessel and fleet-wide levels?

The overall aim was to gather stakeholders' perspectives on the current flexible permit conditions and to understand expectations and potential impacts associated with any future changes to pot limits or permit access.

A structured questionnaire was developed and made available via the website, emailed to all Byelaw 4 permit holders and put up on NWIFCA's social media. Responses were accepted between 24th November 2025 and 4th January 2026.

Text responses were analysed using thematic analysis. Responses were reviewed and coded to identify recurring themes, concerns and viewpoints relevant to the management of the fishery. This approach enabled qualitative stakeholder views to be systematically assessed and summarised.

A total of five responses were received (see Figure 9) during the consultation period. While the number of responses was limited, they represent the key stakeholder groups directly affected by changes to the whelk permit system and provide valuable contextual evidence to support the review of the flexible permit conditions.

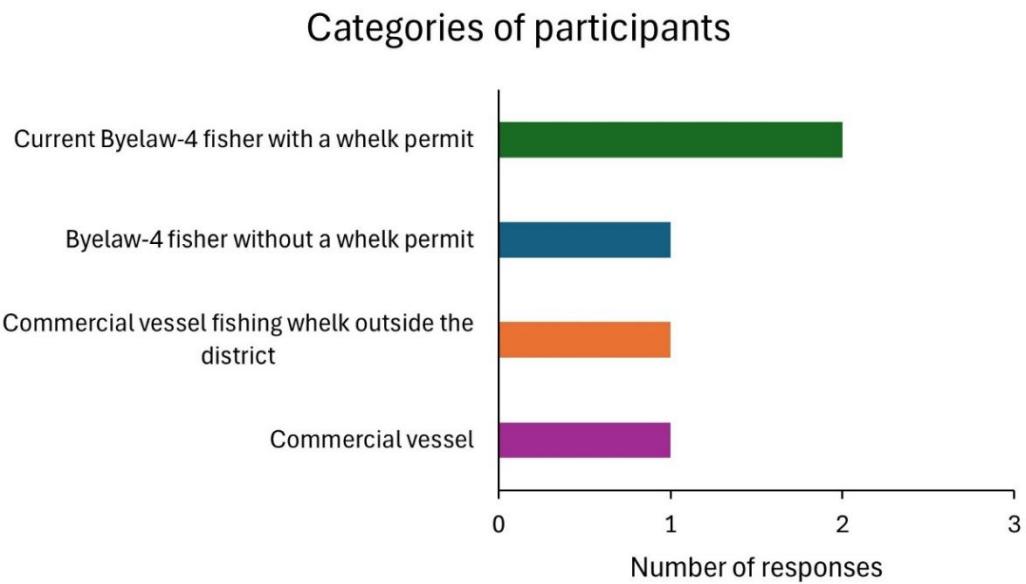


Figure 9. Number of consultation responses received from each stakeholder category.

The five respondents were asked the question *“If NWIFCA were to open up applications for a whelk permit again, would you apply for one?”* to which two respondents said that they would consider applying.

Figure 10 shows unanimous support for implementing pot limits, with all five respondents supporting the measure. Table 2 shows the three themes that respondents answers were categorised into after thematic analysis.

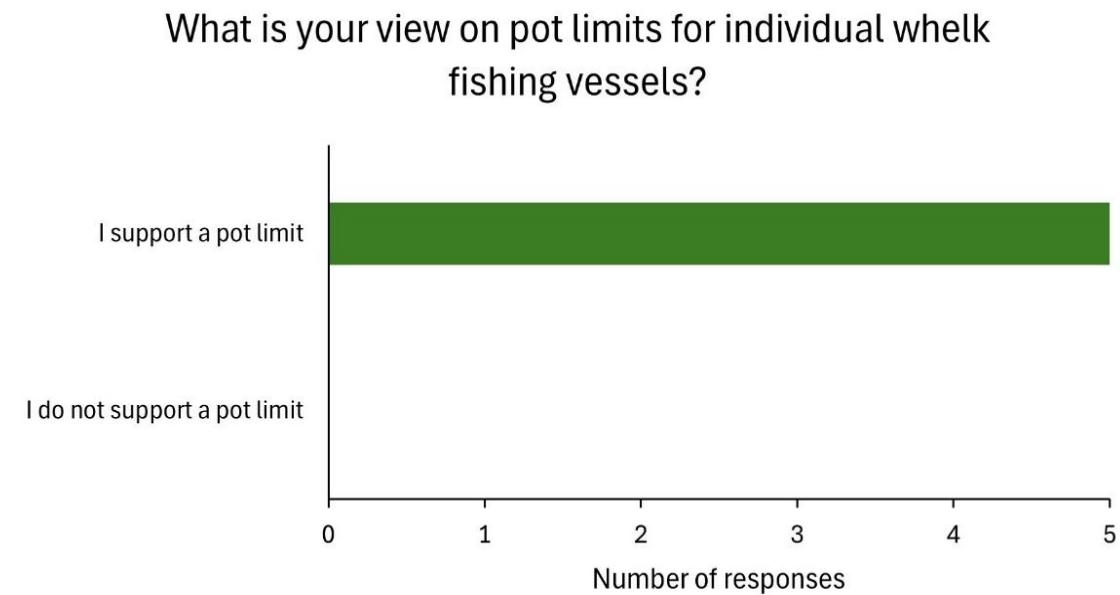


Figure 10. Consultation responses regarding pot limits for individual whelk fishing vessels.

Table 2. Thematic analysis on participants' perspectives on pot limits for individual whelk fishing vessels.

Theme	Number of respondents raising it	Key points raised
Fishing area and pot management	5	<ul style="list-style-type: none"> • Support for retaining pot limits to avoid excessive gear and crowding • Desire for limits to reflect vessel size • Priority for local vessels and protection of available fishing space.
Environmental conservation measures	3	<ul style="list-style-type: none"> • Support for pot limits to protect whelk stocks • Need for scientific evidence to support management decisions • Recognition that year-round whelk fishing requires stronger conservation controls
Regulatory economic factors	2	<ul style="list-style-type: none"> • Desire for flexibility in pot limits in response to market conditions • Support pot limits that reflect vessel size

Figure 11 shows that most respondents (four out of five) support implementing a fleet-wide pot limit, whilst one respondent does not support this measure. Table 3 shows the four themes that respondents answers were categorised into after thematic analysis.

What is your view on pot limits for the fleet as a whole?

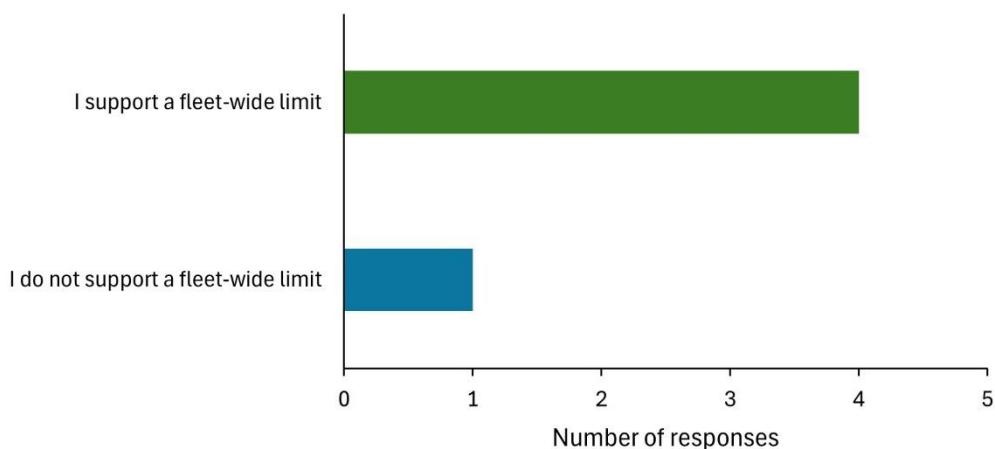


Figure 11. Consultation responses regarding pot limits for the whelk fishing fleet.

Table 3. Thematic analysis on participants perspectives on pot limits fleet wide for whelk fishing vessels.

Theme	Number of respondents raising it	Key points raised
Fish stock conservation	2	<ul style="list-style-type: none"> • Support for a fleet-wide pot limit to prevent overfishing • Desire for scientific evidence to underpin any limit.
Fishing economic allocation	1	<ul style="list-style-type: none"> • Concerns about fairness between full-time and part-time fisheries under a fleet-wide limit
Fishing area and Pot management	1	<ul style="list-style-type: none"> • Concern that gear from vessels outside the district can crowd fishing grounds and limit access for local vessels.
Environmental conservation measures	1	<ul style="list-style-type: none"> • Support for pot limits as a way to improve gear efficiency and reduce environmental impact.

Current permit holders were asked the question “*Are you currently experiencing any issues or challenges with your existing whelk permit (e.g. overcrowding of grounds, market prices, bait used etc.)?*”, to which respondents raised concerns about bait costs and availability, gear conflict with other fishing methods. They also mentioned if the fishery was to expand there is potential for increased pressure on fishing grounds from vessels operating outside the district.

Table 4 shows the four themes that respondents answers were categorised into after thematic analysis and their direction of views to the question “*What are your views on the sustainability of increasing the number of whelk permits or pots within the district?*”.

Table 4. Thematic analysis on participants perspectives on the sustainability of increasing the number of whelk permits or pots within the district.

Theme	Direction of views	Key points raised
Access and fairness within the fishery	Mixed (some supportive)	<ul style="list-style-type: none"> Access to the fishery should be shared rather than restricted Allowing additional permit holders would not harm sustainability Part-time participation could create unfair use of allocated effort Increased permits or pots could undermine both fairness and sustainability.
Concern about increased fishing pressure	Negative	<ul style="list-style-type: none"> The fishery currently operates at an appropriate level Concern that additional permits or pots would increase pressure on stocks and affect sustainability Part-time participation could create unfair use of allocated effort
Perceived declining participation and impacts from regulations	Negative	<ul style="list-style-type: none"> View that regulatory requirements are already reducing participation Belief that demand for additional permits is likely to decline regardless
Evidence based management and stock assessment	Neutral	<ul style="list-style-type: none"> Emphasis on understanding current stock sustainability before increasing permits or pots. Support for decisions being informed by regular scientific assessment.

Table 5 shows participants responses to the question “*If pot limits were changed how many pots do you believe would be viable and appropriate for you to fish under a permit?*”.

Responses indicated a range of views on viable pot limits under a permit. Suggested limits varied depending on the vessel size and whether vessels were fishing whelks exclusively or as part of a polyvalent operation. While some respondents identified specific pot numbers that they felt were appropriate, others expressed a preference for flexibility or did not hold a strong view. Overall, responses acknowledged a need to balance access to the fishery with stock protection for the future.

Table 5. Key considerations and summaries of participants perspectives on how many pots they believe would be viable and appropriate to fish under a Byelaw 4 permit.

Key consideration	Summary of responses
Suggested pot numbers	Suggested pot numbers ranged from 500 to 1,000 pots depending on vessel size and fishing activity.
Vessel size differentiation	Some respondents felt pot limits should vary by vessel length, with lower limits for vessels under 10 metres and higher limits for larger vessels.
Fishing activity	Respondents operating polyvalent vessels indicated lower viable pot numbers than those fishing whelks exclusively.
Flexibility and personal preference	A small number of respondents expressed no strong preference or indicated that limits should be flexible.
Sustainability considerations	Several responses emphasised the importance of avoiding excessive pot numbers to protect stocks and ensure the long-term viability of the fishery.

The final question of the questionnaire asked: “*Do you have any other comments about the Byelaw 4 whelk permit or the whelk fishery overall?*”.

Responses reflected a range of views on the management of the whelk fishery and the operation of the Byelaw 4 permit scheme. Some permit holders expressed support for NWIFCA’s management approach, acknowledging that measures such as increases in the MCRS and permit fees were necessary to protect future stock sustainability and encourage responsible participation in the fishery. Others raised concerns about further increases to the MCRS, indicating that additional changes could negatively affect the viability of the fishery.

More critical comments focused on dissatisfaction with elements of the permit system, particularly pot allocation decisions, the use of track record and spatial limits, and the perceived impact on local operators. These respondents highlighted concerns about

fairness, economic impacts, and competition from vessels operating from outside the district, and felt that the current arrangements placed local fishers at a disadvantage.

6. National Whelk FMP

Defra's national Whelk FMP recognises that whelk stocks in English waters are data limited, with insufficient scientific evidence to assess the stocks maximum sustainable yield. Whelk fishing effort has increased in recent years due to the export demand and reduction in fishing opportunities for other species. Whelk stocks are vulnerable to overexploitation due to the species' sedentary nature, short larval dispersal and slow recovery from localised depletion.

In general, access to whelk fisheries in offshore waters is largely unrestricted, with limited measures in place to protect stocks from overexploitation, a minimum conservation reference size (MCRS) of 45mm applies. In inshore waters, IFCAAs regulate whelk fishing within the 0 to 6 nautical mile zone, with several IFCAAs already enforcing whelk-specific management measures, including operating permit schemes with flexible permit conditions, pot limitations and larger MCRSs. However, the FMP makes clear that there is no conclusive evidence on the effect of these measures due to the lack of whelk stock data; this is now a priority for Defra to improve its evidence base to establish sustainable harvest rates.

The FMP identifies effort-based management as the primary tool for sustainable management of the whelk fishery. The key proposal is the introduction of a whelk permit or entitlement scheme with conditions designed to allow adaptive management of fishing effort at a local level. Measures such as pot limitations, MCRS, seasonal closures and spatial restrictions are specifically identified as tools that may be applied through such permit schemes. These measures would help control effort in whelk fisheries in the long-term.

7. Discussion

The review of the flexible permit conditions has considered whelk fishery data collected since August 2022, stakeholder consultation responses, comparisons with management approaches in other jurisdictions, and the policy direction set by the national whelk FMP.

NWIFCA's whelk fishing data shows that since Byelaw 4 was introduced in 2022 there has been an increase in participation, effort and landings up to 2024, as vessels began operating under the new permit scheme. This increase was particularly pronounced in ICES rectangle 37E6 which contributed disproportionately to the peak in both effort and landings recorded in 2024. However, since this peak there has been a noticeable reduction in overall effort and a decline in landings and LPUE across the district. As a sedentary and slow-recovering species, whelk stocks are vulnerable to localised depletion where fishing pressure becomes concentrated.

Permit numbers within the district have fallen steadily since the scheme was introduced, with only three active permit holders remaining in 2026. While this decline might suggest there is available capacity within the fishery, the analysis and consultation responses highlight the ongoing risk of latent effort. Reopening access and / or increasing pot limits could rapidly increase fishing pressure, either through new permit holders or through existing permit holders expanding activity beyond current levels.

The stakeholder consultation demonstrates recognition that effort controls are necessary to protect stock sustainability and available fishing space. Although some respondents supported the principle of wider access or increased pot allocations, these views were consistently counterbalanced by concerns about stock health, fairness and overcrowding. Importantly, even respondents advocating change acknowledged the need for evidence-based management and safeguards to prevent over-exploitation.

The review of other IFCAs' whelk management, as well as within neighbouring jurisdictions, shows that these fisheries are widely managed through restrictive effort controls, including pot limits and elevated MCRSs. In areas with established whelk fisheries, pot limits are generally lower than those permitted under NWIFCA's own current track-record allocation. This indicates that NWIFCA's existing limits are already comparatively generous and that further pot increases could place the fishery outside the range of precautionary effort controls applied elsewhere in the UK.

The national Whelk FMP reinforces this conclusion. It identifies whelk as a highly vulnerable, data-limited stock and emphasises that effort management through permit schemes is the primary management available to protect stock. The FMP warns that expansion of fishing opportunity in the absence of robust whelk stock data carries a high risk of localised depletion and reduced fishery sustainability. NWIFCA's flexible permit conditions align with this national approach and are intended to control effort rather than facilitate expansion.

The evidence indicates that the current flexible permit conditions are effectively constraining fishing effort within precautionary limits. Any changes to access to the fishery or pot allocations should be carefully managed and implemented while maintaining a capped district-wide pot allocation to ensure that fishing pressure does not increase beyond sustainable levels.

While the district's fishery remains productive, declining LPUE trends, the vulnerability of the stock and national policy guidance all highlight the risks associated with unrestricted increases in effort. A managed approach that maintains a fixed district-wide cap on total pots, while allowing limited and controlled access for new entrants, provides the most appropriate means of safeguarding stock sustainability and supporting the long-term viability of the fishery.

8. Recommendation

Based on the evidence reviewed in this report, NWIFCA officers recommend that applications for a Byelaw 4 whelk permit are reopened on a limited and controlled basis, subject to a district-wide maximum pot limit.

Analysis of fishing activity and LPUE indicates that while the fishery has remained productive, catch efficiency has declined since 2024 across all ICES rectangles within the district. The precautionary guidance set out in the national Whelk FMP combined with the declining LPUE within the district supports the need to prevent unnecessary increases in fishing effort.

Therefore, officers recommend that the district-wide pot allocation is capped at 5,200 pots, reflecting the total pot capacity in place at the introduction of the permit scheme in 2022. This provides continuity with the original management framework and ensures that reopening access to the fishery does not result in an increase in overall fishing pressure.

NWIFCA officers also propose that the lower pot limit of 400 pots should be increased to 500 pots per vessel. This will help with operational viability and reflects stakeholder feedback regarding practical operation within the fishery. Under this new structure the three current permitted vessels would have a total pot allocation of 2,500 leaving 2,700 pots remaining, which would allow for the issuance of up to five additional whelk permits, each with a maximum allocation of 500 pots.

This will allow for a limited and controlled approach of allowing new whelk fishers access to the fishery while maintaining control on overall fishing effort. By keeping a cap on total authorised pot numbers and operating through the existing flexible permit conditions, NWIFCA can safeguard stock sustainability and respond adaptively to future changes as the fishery's data improves. Together these measures provide a balanced approach between supporting fishing opportunities and ensuring the long-term sustainable management of the whelk fishery within the NWIFCA district.

9. Conclusion and Next Steps

This review has examined the effectiveness of the flexible permit conditions applied to the whelk fishery under Byelaw 4, with particular focus on the track record requirement for Category 1 permits and the maximum pot allocations permitted under each permit category. This review concludes that the current flexible permit conditions remain an appropriate and precautionary mechanism for managing fishing effort within the district's whelk fishery. Subject to agreement of the recommendations outlined above, the following next steps are proposed:

- Existing Byelaw 4 whelk permit holders will be notified of the proposed amendments to pot allocations and flexible permit conditions. Vessels who established track record and were allocated a 1,000-pot limit will maintain this entitlement. The one existing vessel without a track record, and therefore with a 400-pot limit, will have their limit increased to 500 pots.
- Applications for new Byelaw 4 whelk permits will then be opened for a two-month period, covering March and April. Based on the agreed district-wide cap of 5,200 pots and revised pot allocation of 500 pots per vessel, capacity currently exists for up to five additional permits.
- Where the number of applications slightly exceeds available capacity, minor reductions to individual pot allocations may be considered to accommodate applicants while remaining within the overall effort limit.
- Where applications substantially exceed capacity, distributing pots across a larger number of vessels may not be viable. In such cases, the Authority will consider introducing additional eligibility criteria (e.g. track record or a points-based assessment) and may request further supporting information from applicants to inform a fair and transparent allocation process.
- Following determination of applications, the flexible permit conditions will be amended and implemented accordingly.
- Fishing activity, landings and effort will continue to be monitored through mandatory returns to inform ongoing management.
- A further review of the flexible permit conditions will be undertaken within a maximum of three years, or sooner if monitoring indicates that management intervention is required.

References

UK Government Website (2023) *Fisheries management plan for whelk in English Waters*. Available at: <https://www.gov.uk/government/publications/whelk-fisheries-management-plan-fmp-for-english-waters/fisheries-management-plan-for-whelk-in-english-waters>.