

Sussex IFCA Annual Conservation & Research Report 2024-2025

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There was a wide range of Conservation and Research (C&R) work undertaken between April 2024 and March 2025. Workstreams are described in the Annual Conservation and Research Plan. Each workstream sits under one of nine themes: Byelaw development, Byelaw review, Marine Protected Areas, Monitoring, Fisheries Management Plans, Research, Stakeholder engagement, Consultations, or Internal business (changed from the 2024-2028 Four-Year Plan and associated annual plans). Progress against each workstream is detailed below.

The continued hard work of all staff is evident in the breadth and quality of C&R work produced in the 2024-25 financial year. Collaborative working with partner organisations is a great strength, providing mutual benefits in the sharing of resources, experience, skills and data. Sussex IFCA also continue to make significant contributions to work being done at a regional and national level through the Fisheries Management Plans, and this has become an important workstream. Research has been directly applied in providing evidence for the development and review of new and existing byelaws, which aim to protect the marine environment, balanced against the social and economic value of fishing.

The highest priorities for the year were:

- Development and submission of management proposals for Beachy Head East MCZ
- A management review of Kingmere MCZ including a review of the evidence and monitoring data collected to-date.
- Development and expansion of the Catch Return Database to include catch returns submitted under the Hand Gathering Byelaw.
- Continued support of the Fish Intel project, including receiver deployment, maintenance and support of any subsequent funding bids.
- Continued active involvement in Sussex Kelp Recovery Project, supporting various monitoring efforts and leading on annual towed video surveys.
- Engagement with the development and application of Fisheries Management Plans.

Byelaw development and Marine Protected Areas

Hand Gathering Byelaw

Proof of concept study completed with Niall Burnside of Scottish Association of Marine Science (SAMS), demonstrating that drone-captured ariel imagery has the potential to quantify proxies for effort in the intertidal hand gathering

fishery. The C&R team have also been central to supporting Senior Management develop and deliver the expansion of the catch return database system to include hand gathering catch returns, as well as in the development of communication materials explaining the new regulations to stakeholders.

Minimum size Byelaw

Officers developed communication materials for the Minimum Size Byelaw, explaining the requirements, value, and aims of the new regulations to stakeholders. The elasmobranch Code of Conduct, developed in the previous financial year, was also disseminated.

Beachy Head East MCZ management development

The responses to the second-round formal consultation were analysed and as a result an amendment to the management zones was approved. The management schedule was resubmitted to the MMO and Defra to undergo the Quality Assurance process. The Impact Assessment has undergone a round of minor revisions as part of the process. Collection of baseline data through BRUV, eDNA, and potting surveys is planned.

Byelaw review and Marine Protected Areas

Kingmere MCZ management review

The Kingmere MCZ management review was largely completed in 2024, with sufficient evidence and Committee support to indicate that the current management is performing well and delivering on its Conservation Objectives. This involved the collation of a volume of evidence from monitoring efforts by Sussex IFCA, University of Sussex, and Marine Ecological Solutions Ltd (specifically by Matt Doggett and funded by Tarmac and Cemex) and was utilised to demonstrate that evidence suggests that black seabream populations are increased in Kingmere MCZ as well as across the District more broadly. Discussions with the Angling Trust and Southern IFCA have also started regarding a joined-up monitoring plan that can help us engage and learn from the angling community and build relationships.

Monitoring

Shellfish permit monitoring

The 2024 Shellfish Catch Return Report is available on the Sussex IFCA website [here](#) and shared with relevant partners (Cefas, Blue Marine Foundation) and partnership groups (Whelk Working Group, CHASM). This report summarizes trends over time for key shellfish fisheries found within the Sussex IFCA District (lobster, edible crab, cuttlefish, and whelk).

Towed video surveys

A flying array was purchased from Devon and Severn IFCA which is planned to replace the current sled used in the towed underwater video surveys. The new array will capture images that are more optimal for analysis and significantly reduce interaction with the seabed. Sussex IFCA have been in talks with ZSL regarding how the methodology and survey design could be slightly adapted to better suited the evolving requirements of Sussex IFCA, including better coverage of the diversity of habitats in the district and exploratory habitat surveys.

Small fish surveys

Sussex IFCA assisted the Solent Seascape Project SFS in Chichester Harbour over the year. Surveys in partnership with Sparsholt also occurred in October. Sussex IFCA continues to communicate with Pagham RSPB to organise the resumption of SFS in Medmerry and ran the first small fish survey in Rye Nature Reserve with Sussex Wildlife Trust in many years.

Research

Scallop potting

In collaboration with FishTek Marine and local fishers, Sussex IFCA are developing a pre-trial to establish whether there is the potential for a scallop potting fishery in Sussex. This is the very first step and is designed to help us understand whether scallop pots fish effectively in Sussex, as opposed to a trial fishery, which would come at a later point contingent on the success of the pre-trial. Fifteen scallop pots have been purchased from FishTek Marine, and conversations with fishers to allow flexibility in the way the pots are used, whilst ensuring that the catch return data is collected in a standardised and consistent manner, are ongoing. The intention is to have pots in the water before the end of summer 2025.

Barriers and Optimum Conditions Report

The Barriers and Optimum Conditions Report has been published by Blue Marine Foundation and offers a review of the ecological and barriers to recovery of UK kelps species, as well as a focus on Sussex and look to future research and monitoring. Sussex IFCA were collaborators along with researchers from multiple research institutions and the report is available [here](#).

Kelp Summit

Sussex IFCA also presented at and assisted with the Kelp Summit which brought together kelp researchers from around the UK for a day of talks followed by a day or workshops. This has helped SKRP plan a route forward and helped highlight potential data gaps and collaborations.

Fish telemetry

Sussex IFCA continue to collaborate on the Fish Intel project, led by the University of Plymouth, and receiver maintenance was performed throughout the year as usual. Officers continue to work with UoP researchers and other partners to progress scientific publications using data from the Sussex array, focusing on black seabream and European seabass ecology in relation to fisheries management, as well as a broader methodology paper to highlight the value of using acoustic telemetry to monitor and inform fisheries management. The first of which has now been published by Dr Peter Davies titled "[Interannual homing to reproductive sites and transboundary migration in black seabream *Spondylus cantharus*, with implications for management](#)". Officers also assisted with tagging of tope sharks and thornback rays as part of the follow-on project called 'Angling for Sustainability'. Now some of the tags deployed in Sussex have stopped transmitting, as expected due to battery life, the project is looking for renewed funding to expand and continue its work.

Fishing vessel effort

Sussex IFCA collect data on observed fishing activity whilst on sea patrols, fishing vessel effort is then calculated for each 5-year period, by dividing the number of sightings by the area patrolled by FPV Watchful for each km² of the district. This is documented in a Fishing Vessel Effort Report, the updated fishing effort grids and report have been published for 2020-2024, available [here](#). The look, presentation, and analysis of the Fishing Vessel Effort Report has been updated for this year.

Potting surveys

Potting surveys conducted with Blue Marine Foundation in Selsey and Brighton, as part of Sussex Kelp Restoration Project, continued for a third year. Potting surveys measure the abundance, size, weight, sex and condition of edible crab, European lobster, and spider crab at sites inside and outside the Nearshore Trawling Byelaw area.

Sussex IFCA have been rolling out its own project to conduct year-round potting surveys with several surveys completed this year, however progress has been moderate, partly due to capacity for spontaneous fieldwork at Sussex IFCA. The intention is to help to fill evidence gaps outlined in the Crab and Lobster FMP and Sussex IFCA continues to send Cefas biometric data to feed into their national annual stock assessments. In the long-term this data could be used to perform a Sussex-specific stock assessment.

International Council for the Exploration of the Sea (ICES) conference

Sussex IFCA presented an oral presentation and poster at the ICES Conference 2024, which showcased the development of the Nearshore Trawling Byelaw and the some of the work with Plymouth University on the Fish Intel project.

Review of GIS data

An audit of all GIS data help by Sussex IFCA was completed in 2024-25 financial year, although this work started in the previous year. This does not have any direct outputs but will improve efficiency across all GIS-related tasks and was a substantial undertaking.

Fisheries Management Plans

Skate and Ray FMP

Defra held a meeting in April to provide an overview of the changes that were made to the draft FMP following Working Group (WG) comments and the Defra quality assurance process. This also drew to a close the MMO's role as delivery partner with the WG, handing over to Defra to take forward the development of the FMP through consultation to publication. Some of the commitments recommended by the WG were softened, for example a commitment to develop a cross-species MCRS, was changed to "considering" such a measure. The intention to investigate spatial and/or seasonal management of the undulate ray fishery, due to the association between the 7d/7e ICES areas and undulate ray reproduction, was also removed, however, following a robust response to the redrafted FMP, which challenged the suitability of these changes in isolation of consultation with the WG, this intention was reinstated.

Seabream FMP

Sussex IFCA attended every WG meeting, all in-person consultation events in Sussex, and provided comments on several iterations of the draft FMP. The spatial management of seabream fisheries in Sussex as well as proposed measures within Southern IFCA District were considered as part of the FMP, however a clear distinction between the delivery of this management and the outcomes of the FMP have been drawn. Several measures were proposed, such as an MCRS and bag limit, and were supported by the WG and many stakeholders. These measures were softened during the Defra quality assurance process but may still be achievable in the medium-term. The focus has been adjusted to the delivery of a stock assessment, which will then inform any necessary further management measures.

Whelk FMP

Discussions around the Whelk FMP have moved on the consideration of specific proposed management measures; the introduction of an entitlement scheme and MCRS. Both of these proposals are quite complex; entitlements must work with several distinct IFCA permit schemes, and the spatial ecology of whelks means that the appropriate MCRS can differ over relatively small spatial scales (within an IFCA District for example). Sussex IFCA continue to contribute to these topic specific working groups and providing evidence and comment when requested. As one of the most important fisheries in the Sussex IFCA District, we are keen that the FMP contributes effectively to the sustainability of the fishery.

Bass FMP

The Bass Management Group (BMG) launched in November 2024, and the Chief Officer has attended all three meetings to date. Initial focus has been on prioritisation of the action areas highlighted from the Bass FMP as well as understanding the evidence gaps and how these can be addressed. The BMG aims to tackle these action areas through the use of 'Task & Finish Groups' which will report to the BMG, the first of which, chaired by the MMO is underway and focussed on reviewing bass authorisations, with stakeholder engagement sessions held in early 2025.

Consultations and Stakeholder engagement

Marine Case Management System

Sussex IFCA continue to contribute to various consultations relevant to fisheries management at the broader scale through the Marine Case Management System. Sussex IFCA have also attended many of the engagement events in the district for different Fisheries Management Plans and promoted these various social media and word-of-mouth channels. As part of presentations made to the MMO for the Whelk FMP Sussex IFCA approached whelk fishers in the district for a conversation regarding the whelk fishery and to complete a survey, the results of which were then analysed and summarised in a report.

Brighton Marina

Sussex IFCA continue to oppose the licensing of dredge material disposal within Beachy Head West MCZ and have provided further consultation responses to the proposal to extend the license and increase the volume of dredged material that can be disposed of within the MCZ. This included input from a Technical Subcommittee in March 2025. The Authority stands by their continued concerns

both with the suitability of the licence, and the lack of robustness of the monitoring regime. We asked that all points raised were considered as requiring a formal response from the Brighton Marina applicants. Sussex IFCA received its first formal response on this issue from the MMO. However, in our view it is unclear how, when applying the precautionary principle, this marine licence could be viewed as not having a detrimental impact on the sensitive conservation features of the MCZ, which include sedentary molluscan bivalve beds and chalk reef communities.

Rampion 2

Officers engaged with the extensive examination process for Rampion 2, which ended in August 2024. The "Decision" stage of the process proceeded this, and Sussex IFCA provided additional comment on the wording around piling restrictions intended to protect black seabream from underwater noise during the reproductive season. The Secretary of State granted development consent for Rampion 2 on 4th April 2025. The limits for the project area fall next to, but outside, Kingmere MCZ. The Examining Authorities Recommendation Report includes mitigation actions to prevent negative effects on wildlife, including the use of bubble curtains while piling and a piling exclusion period of 1st March-30th June to help protect the black bream spawning season. The project has also committed to an Alternative Dispute Resolution process, which allows fishers to seek compensation for the impact of the development on their business, Sussex IFCA will look to support and highlight this process.

Internal business

Recruitment

There was a significant recruitment drive in the 2024-25 financial year due to the departure of two Research Officers, and maternity leave for an additional two Research Officers. This unplanned and significant draw on capacity, not just during the recruitment process but also during the induction and training phases, necessitated that some planned work be pushed into the following financial year. However, the recruitment and induction processes have been very positive, and C&R are now well placed to push forward in 2025-26.

Training

Sussex IFCA C&R Officers completed a range of training, including the attendance of two Officers at the first IFCA-ran Environmental Officers course, which aimed to cover a background in the duties that are common across different IFCA Districts. In May, IFCA Officers organised a training session hosted by the Environment Agency, to refresh and improve survey techniques and small fish identification. Furthermore, one Officer started training to gain a GVC drone licence, in order to be able to lead future drone surveys.