

Irish Sea Demersal Fisheries Management Plan

Screening - Scoping Report - Strategic Environmental Assessment

JULY 2023

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1. Introduction

1.1. Background

- 1.1.1. [The Fisheries Act 2020](#) requires the fisheries policy authorities in the UK to publish the Fisheries Management Plans (FMPs) set out in the [Joint Fisheries Statement \(JFS\)](#), to manage fishing activity so the harvesting of fish stocks remains within sustainable levels.
- 1.1.2. The Irish Sea Demersal FMP is one of the 43 FMPs identified by UK fisheries policy authorities in the JFS. A timetable for the preparation and publication of the FMPs can be found in Annex A of the JFS and summarised on Gov.UK: see [the List of FMPs](#).

1.2. Fisheries Management Plans – context and background

- 1.2.1. Marine fish stocks are a public resource and important natural asset. Managing fishing activity so that we harvest our stocks within sustainable limits will ensure our fishing communities and the seafood supply chain continue to benefit from our natural assets, now and into the future.
- 1.2.2. [The Fisheries Act 2020](#) requires the fisheries policy authorities¹ in the UK to publish Fisheries Management Plans (FMPs) as set out in the JFS, to manage fishing activity so the harvesting of fish stocks remains within sustainable levels. FMPs will set out policies as well as new and existing management measures following the broader policy direction of the [JFS](#).
- 1.2.3. Sustainable fisheries protect their stocks and the wider environment whilst delivering social and economic prosperity. Fisheries management decisions should balance environmental, economic and social considerations to create sustainable fisheries that benefit present and future generations. It means ensuring that fish stocks can be fished commercially and recreationally, both now and in the future. Both the short-term and the long-term impacts of decisions managing fishing activity to protect stocks and on the fishing industry should be considered, while any short-term decisions to give social or economic benefit should not significantly compromise the long-term health of the marine environment. These decisions should recognise the cultural importance of fishing through maintaining and, where possible, strengthening coastal communities and livelihoods alongside the requirement for fish stocks to reach and maintain sustainable levels.
- 1.2.4. All FMPs must contain the information set out in [Section 6](#) of the Fisheries Act (2020). In summary, a FMP must specify the relevant authority; stock or stocks, type of fishing and geographical area to which the plan relates; the status of the stocks; policies and actions to harvest within sustainable limits; and the indicators to be used to monitor the effectiveness of the plan.
- 1.2.5. FMPs must specify whether there is sufficient evidence to assess a stock's Maximum Sustainable Yield (MSY). Where there is insufficient evidence, the FMP must specify the steps (if any) that the relevant authority or authorities propose to take to obtain the scientific evidence necessary to enable an

¹ **Fisheries policy authorities:** As defined by section 52 of the Fisheries Act 2020, “fisheries policy authorities” means (a) the Secretary of State, (b) the Scottish Ministers, (c) the Welsh Ministers, and (d) the Northern Ireland department.

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assessment of a stock's MSY. If no steps are proposed, the FMP will explain the reasons for that, and how the precautionary approach to fisheries management will be applied so fish are harvested within sustainable limits.

- 1.2.6. Through managing fishing activity within sustainable limits, FMPs will contribute to the fisheries objectives set out in section 1 of the Fisheries Act 2020. The scope of a FMP may be extended to consider wider fisheries management issues, such as related environmental, social or economic matters. How FMPs consider wider fisheries management issues will be determined at the individual FMP level, appropriate to the stock(s), fishery and geographic area within the remit of the FMP.
- 1.2.7. The Fisheries Act required FMPs to report their effectiveness every three years and be reviewed at least every six years. FMPs will evolve as our understanding and evidence base develops through their implementation. Some FMPs will progressively address a wider range of fisheries management issues as they evolve through an iterative approach over time.
- 1.2.8. FMPs will contain a range of policies and fisheries management measures/interventions whose detail will vary depending on the evidence available to support their implementation. Some policies/measures may only indicate future action and will develop over time as the plan's evidence progresses through each iteration.
- 1.2.9. FMPs will adopt an ecosystem-based approach to fisheries management to help deliver environmental, social and economic benefits beyond those accrued from just achieving the sustainable harvesting of stocks.
- 1.2.10. The policies and actions proposed by a FMP will apply to all vessels (UK and non-UK vessels) fishing in the area covered by the plan.

1.3. Draft Irish Sea Demersal FMP Objectives

- 1.3.1. Vision for the draft Irish Sea Demersal FMP: *The key commercial quota stocks in the UK Irish Sea waters are managed to ensure their long-term sustainability and economic profitability, while maintaining public confidence in the management of this important resource.*
- 1.3.2. The draft Irish Sea Demersal FMP has the following fisheries management objectives for key commercial species exploited in UK Irish Sea waters such as Irish Sea Nephrops, Haddock, Sole, and Plaice. This could also include bycatch avoidance measures for Cod and Whiting.
 - **Objective 1:** Develop and pilot a comprehensive data collection programme for the Irish Sea Demersal fisheries, which supports a data rich future and results in the establishment of a reliable time series that facilitates robust, sustainable management.
 - **Objective 2:** Define keystone boundaries at a suitable scale for management.
 - **Objective 3:** Assess catch per unit effort (CPUE) in the Irish Sea Demersal fisheries.

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- **Objective 4:** Explore options for assessing stock(s) or exploitation status.
- **Objective 5:** Assess the impact of fishing for Haddock, Sole, Plaice and Irish Sea Nephrops in UK Irish Sea waters on the wider marine environment.
- **Objective 6:** Explore the need for management around interactions between demersal fishing in the UK Irish Sea waters and other fisheries.
- **Objective 7:** Create a proposed programme of management to align fishing effort with actual / likely stock status.

1.3.3. Further explanation of how the plan's objectives will be achieved will be provided in the Environmental Report.

2. Legal Obligations

2.1.1. [The Environmental Assessment of Plans and Programmes Regulations \(Northern Ireland\) 2004](#) S.R. 2004 No. 280 (SEA Regulations 2004) requires that qualifying public plans, programmes, and strategies undergo Strategic Environmental Assessment (SEA) during their preparation and prior to adoption.

2.1.2. Regulation 3 of the SEA Regulations 2004 applies to the draft Irish Sea Demersal FMP.

2.1.3. A screening exercise (see section 5.1 of this Scoping Report) determined that an assessment of the potential effects of the draft Irish Sea Demersal FMP on European sites will be required (regulation 5(3)). Consequently, regulation 5(1) requires that an environmental assessment of the Irish Sea Demersal FMP must be carried out in accordance with Part 3 of the SEA Regulations 2004.

2.1.4. A SEA requires an Environmental Report, which must be subject to public consultation upon alongside the draft FMP. The next step in the SEA process is therefore to carry out a scoping exercise (see section 5.3), the purpose of which is to identify the scope and level of detail of the assessment which will be documented in the Environmental Report. Regulation 11(5) requires the responsible authority to seek the views of the consultation body when deciding on the scope and level of detail for the Environmental Report. This present document sets out the proposed content of the Environmental Report on the draft Irish Sea Demersal FMP to seek the views of the DAERA SEA Team as the consultation body in Northern Ireland.

2.1.5. Regulation 11(3) of the SEA Regulations 2004 requires that the Environmental Report shall include the information referred to in Schedule 2, in so far as it is reasonably required. Table 1 sets out which section of this present report corresponds to the relevant paragraphs of Schedule 2.

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Table 1. How the sections of this present report correspond to appropriate paragraphs of Schedule 2 of the [SEA Regulations 2004](#).

Section(s) of present Report	Corresponding Paragraph in Schedule 2
Sections: 1 and 4	Paragraph 1: <i>An outline of the contents and main objectives of the plan or programme, and of its relationship with other relevant plans and programmes.</i>
Section: 3	Paragraph 2: <i>The relevant aspects of the current state of the environment and the likely evolution thereof without implementation of the plan or programme.</i>
Section: 3	Paragraph 3: <i>The environmental characteristics of areas likely to be significantly affected.</i>
Section: 3	Paragraph 4: <i>Any existing environmental problems which are relevant to the plan or programme including, in particular, those relating to any areas of a particular environmental importance, [such as areas designated pursuant to Council Directive 79/409/EEC on the conservation of wild birds and the Habitats Directive]</i>
Section: 4	Paragraph 5: <i>The environmental protection objectives, established at international level, which are relevant to the plan or programme and the way those objectives and any environmental considerations have been taken into account during its preparation.</i>
Section: 5	Paragraph 6: <i>The likely significant effects on the environment, including short, medium and long-term effects, permanent and temporary effects, positive and negative effects, and secondary, cumulative and synergistic effects, on issues such as– (a) biodiversity; (b) population; (c) human health; (d) fauna; (e) flora; (f) soil; (g) water; (h) air; (i) climatic factors; (j) material assets; (k) cultural heritage, including architectural and archaeological heritage; (l) landscape; and (m) the inter-relationship between the issues referred to in subparagraphs (a) to (l).</i>
Section: 7	Paragraph 7: <i>The measures envisaged to prevent, reduce and as fully as possible offset any significant adverse effects on the environment of implementing the plan or programme.</i>
Section: 6	Paragraph 8: <i>An outline of the reasons for selecting the alternatives dealt with, and a description of how the assessment was undertaken including any difficulties</i>

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Section(s) of present Report	Corresponding Paragraph in Schedule 2
	<i>(such as technical deficiencies or lack of know-how) encountered in compiling the required information.</i>
Section: 7	<i>Paragraph 9: A description of the measures envisaged concerning monitoring in accordance with regulation 16.</i>
Section(s): Not applicable to Scoping Report	<i>Paragraph 10: A non-technical summary of the information provided under paragraphs 1 to 9.</i>

3. Environmental Baseline

- 3.1.1. The Environmental Report for the draft Irish Sea Demersal FMP will provide an overview description of the environmental baseline set out in [The updated UK Marine Strategy Part 1](#) relevant to the environmental issues scoped into the assessment and their associated [UK Marine Strategy \(UK MS\) Descriptors](#).
- 3.1.2. Statistics from the Department for Business, Energy & Industrial Strategy (BEIS) and Department for Transport (DFT) will be used to identify the contribution UK fishing fleets have to the total carbon emissions at sea each year.

3.2. Existing Environmental Pressures

- 3.2.1. The marine environment is subject to a range of pressures derived from human activities. Fishing-related activities form only part of how these pressures affect the current state of our marine environment.
- 3.2.2. Fishing is an ongoing activity that poses a range of risks to the marine environment. [The updated UK Marine Strategy Part 1](#) (Table 3, page 35), documents the pressures caused by anthropogenic activities, which includes fishing, on the marine environment.
- 3.2.3. Fishing activity that targets the key commercial demersal species in UK Irish Sea waters has the potential to cause physical disturbance to the seabed and the mortality of/injury to, wild species, both target and non-target species.
- 3.2.4. Vessels fishing for these commercial species contribute to the total carbon emissions at sea each year by the UK's fishing fleets. Disturbance of blue carbon habitats through fishing practices may affect seabed carbon dynamics.

3.3. Potential Environmental Effects

- 3.3.1. The draft Irish Sea Demersal FMP will focus on managing fishing activity to achieve the sustainable harvesting of the commercially fished stocks in the Irish Sea Demersal area. Management interventions will seek to reduce the

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environmental risks linked to over-fishing these stocks, thereby giving net positive benefit to the environmental status of these stocks.

- 3.3.2. Nevertheless, harvesting within sustainable limits (MSY or appropriate proxies) may not remove all the associated potential negative impacts of fishing for these stocks on the wider marine environment, and additional measures to address risks or impacts may be required. The draft Irish Sea Demersal FMP objectives set out in section 1.3 above, indicate how the plan will consider wider fisheries management issues including those related to the environment, to reduce negative impacts from the fisheries.
- 3.3.3. Further information on the potential environmental effects (both positive and negative) will be provided in the Environmental Report, addressing the issues identified in section 5.3 and Table 2 below.

4. Relevant Plans, Programmes and Environmental Protection Objectives

- 4.1.1. The Environmental Report for the draft Irish Sea Demersal FMP will explain how the FMP relates to other relevant plans, programmes and environmental protection objectives.
- 4.1.2. The sections below set out those plans, programmes and environmental protection objectives that DAERA considers relevant to the implementation of the draft Irish Sea Demersal FMP.

4.2. International

- [Trade and Cooperation Agreement \(TCA\) between the EU and the UK](#)
- [UN Convention on the Law of the Sea \(UNCLOS\)](#)
- [UN Sustainable Development Goals](#)
- [UN Convention on Biological Diversity \(CBD\)](#)
- [Convention on the Conservation of Migratory Species of Wild Animals \(CMS\)](#)
- [RAMSAR Convention](#)
- [Convention on International Trade in Endangered Species of Wild Fauna and Flora \(CITES\)](#)
- [Convention for the Protection of the Marine Environment of the North East Atlantic \(OSPAR\)](#)

4.3. Domestic

- [The Conservation \(Natural Habitats, etc.\) Regulations \(Northern Ireland\) 1995 / The Conservation of Offshore Marine Habitats and Species Regulations 2017](#)
 - Marine Protected Area Network

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- [Marine Strategy Regulations 2010](#)
 - [The UK Marine Strategy \(UK MS\)](#) and Good Environmental Status (GES)
- [Marine and Coastal Access Act 2009 \(MCAA\)](#)
 - Marine Protected Area Network
 - [UK Marine Policy Statement \(MPS\)](#)
 - Marine Plans
- [Environment Act 2021](#)
 - [Environmental Principles](#)
- Environment Strategy (Northern Ireland's first environmental improvement plan)

5. Approach to SEA

5.1. Screening

- 5.1.1. As noted in section 2.1, DAERA carried out a screening exercise to ascertain whether the draft Irish Sea Demersal FMP should be subjected to environmental assessment. It was found that the draft Irish Sea Demersal FMP (with reference to regulation 63 of The Conservation of Habitats and Species Regulations 2017 which extends to Northern Ireland):
- a. is likely to have a significant effect on a European site or a European offshore marine site; and
 - b. has the potential to deteriorate or disturb the interest features of a European site or a European offshore marine site; and
 - c. is not directly connected with or necessary to the management of such European sites.
- 5.1.2. The screening exercise used DAERA's [Northern Ireland Marine Map Viewer](#) to confirm that the geographical scope of the FMP overlaps with European sites or European offshore marine sites. The Northern Ireland offshore zone consists of a number of designated special areas of conservation. [The updated UK Marine Strategy Part 1](#) was used to identify whether fishing activity in the Northern Ireland offshore area has the potential to impact these sites and interest features.
- 5.1.3. The screening undertaken in 5.1.1 indicated that fishing activities covered by the draft Irish Sea Demersal FMP have the potential to affect European marine sites such as marine conservation zones and special areas of conservation, plus the wider marine environment. Therefore, the fisheries policy authorities will need to make an assessment of the implications of the draft Irish Sea Demersal FMP for those designated sites in light of their conservation objectives.
- 5.1.4. As a result, it was concluded that the draft Irish Sea Demersal FMP falls within the description of a plan or programme covered by regulation 5(3) of the SEA Regulations 2004.

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- 5.1.5. The draft Irish Sea Demersal FMP must therefore be subjected to environmental assessment in accordance with Part 3 of those regulations during its preparation and prior to its adoption.

5.2. Scope of the FMP

- 5.2.1. The draft Irish Sea Demersal FMP will apply to all areas of the UK Irish Sea waters of ICES Division 7.a.

5.3. Scope of the Assessment

- 5.3.1. The SEA will take into account the objectives of the FMP and reflect the geographical scope and fishing activity covered by the plan.
- 5.3.2. The SEA will focus on assessing how the FMP is likely to give rise to significant positive and negative environmental effects. The SEA will not assess all the risks and impacts of fishing activity *per se*. Such assessments have already been conducted as part of the UK's obligations under legislation relating to Marine Protected Areas (MPAs) and the wider marine environment (UK MS). It is the FMP itself, as a management plan, that will be assessed rather than the activities themselves.
- 5.3.3. Nevertheless, the SEA will acknowledge those pressures resulting from current fishing activity already being managed and explain how the FMP will support existing mitigation. The plan will also propose new interventions to further mitigate negative environmental effects where necessary.
- 5.3.4. It is important to note the draft FMP will contain a range of policies and fisheries management measures/interventions that vary in their stage of development depending upon the available evidence to support their implementation. The level of detail possible for the environmental assessment will depend upon the stage of development of the policies and measures of the FMP, noting these will evolve over time.
- 5.3.5. Schedule 2 paragraph 6 of the SEA Regulations 2004 lists the issues that must be considered for an assessment of likely significant effect in relation to the proposed FMP.
- 5.3.6. DAERA proposes that the Environmental Report will address the effects on the following issues:
- Biodiversity, fauna and flora
 - Geology and sediments
 - Water
 - Climatic factors
- 5.3.7. Conversely, DAERA proposes that the following issues will be scoped out of the assessment, and will not be covered in the Environmental Report:
- Population
 - Human health
 - Air

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- Material assets
- Cultural Heritage
- Landscape / seascape

- 5.3.8. To link the issues (from Schedule 2 paragraph 6) that will be addressed by the Environmental Report with the environmental baseline (see section 3), we have attributed a UK Marine Strategy (UK MS) descriptor of Good Environmental Status (GES) to the appropriate corresponding issue(s); see [Appendix A](#) for the list of the 11 UK MS descriptors. Achieving GES is about protecting the marine environment, preventing its deterioration, and restoring it where practical, while allowing sustainable use of marine resources.
- 5.3.9. The UK Marine Strategy (UK MS) uses 11 marine descriptors to help assess the status of the marine environment and sets out the framework for achieving GES. By assessing the status of these descriptors, it is possible to identify where improvements are required to achieve GES. Knowing the current status will help direct efforts to reduce the impacts of certain human activities. The [UK Marine Strategy assessment tool](#) provides further information.
- 5.3.10. Table 2 shows the results of the scoping exercise.

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Table 2. Results of the scoping exercise to determine those environmental issues likely to be significantly affected by the draft Irish Sea Demersal FMP and thus scoped into the SEA. Where relevant, the relationship between the issue and the UK MS Descriptor of GES is shown as 'D#' where # represents the number of the descriptor, as shown in [Appendix A](#).

Issue	Potential to cause impacts	Justification
Biodiversity, fauna and flora (UK MS descriptors D1, D3, D4, D6)	Yes	Fishing activity in the Northern Ireland offshore area has the potential to cause physical disturbance to the seabed and result in the extraction of, or mortality/injury to, wild species. See paragraph 3.2.3. These issues are within the scope of this SEA.
Population	No	The FMP would not result in significant increases, decreases or both in human population numbers, or changes to in-migration or out-migration. This issue is beyond the scope of this SEA.
Human health	No	The FMP would not result in any significant human health issues. Whilst fishing remains a dangerous vocation and the FMP will promote safe operations, the regulation of the safety of fishing operations falls elsewhere. This issue is beyond the scope of this SEA.
Geology and sediments (soil) (UK MS descriptor D6)	Yes	The FMP aims to reduce the harmful effects of fishing on the marine environment by adopting an ecosystem-based approach to fisheries management. This issue is within the scope of this SEA.
Water (UK MS descriptors D10, D11)	Yes	The FMP aims to make fishing practices more environmentally sustainable so there is scope to reduce the impact fisheries have on water quality. This issue is within the scope of this SEA.

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Issue	Potential to cause impacts	Justification
Air	No	The FMP is unlikely to result in significant additional vessel emissions and associated air pollution. Reducing vessel emissions from a carbon footprint perspective will be considered by the Climatic factors issue. This issue is beyond the scope of this SEA.
Climatic factors (UK MS descriptor D7)*	Yes	The FMP will contribute to the climate change objective of Fisheries Act, seeking to ensure it develops relevant policies to both mitigate impact on and adapt to climate change. For example, by reducing the carbon footprint of the fishery, and seeking a positive impact on blue carbon habitats. This issue is within the scope of this SEA.
Material assets	No	The FMP will not intrinsically impact on material assets related to; ports and shipping; fisheries and aquaculture; leisure or recreation; tourism; marine manufacturing; defence; aggregate extraction; energy generation and infrastructure development; seabed assets. This issue is beyond the scope of this SEA.
Cultural heritage	No	The FMP is unlikely to significantly alter the current interaction between fishing and underwater cultural heritage. FMPs more broadly are also not intended to focus on mitigating any impacts of fishing on underwater architectural and archaeological heritage. This issue is beyond the scope of this SEA.
Landscape Seascape	No	The FMP is unlikely to significantly alter the current effects of fishing practices on the landscape and or seascape in the UK. This issue is beyond the scope of this SEA.

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6. Reasonable Alternatives

- 6.1.1. The SEA will consider reasonable alternatives to preparing and publishing the draft Irish Sea Demersal FMP and will assess their respective likely significant environmental effects, in accordance with regulation 11(2) of the SEA Regulations 2004. The SEA will set out how the alternatives were selected (Schedule 2, paragraph 8 of the SEA Regulations 2004).
- 6.1.2. Reasonable alternatives have been interpreted by UK fisheries policy authorities to mean 'an activity that could feasibly attain or approximate a programme's objectives, but at a lower environmental cost or decreased level of environmental degradation'.
- 6.1.3. Any difficulties encountered compiling the information on alternatives will be included in the Environmental Report.

7. Mitigation and Monitoring

- 7.1.1. The Environmental Report will consider how the draft Irish Sea Demersal FMP will support existing mitigation, and how it will propose new measures (if necessary) to further mitigate negative environmental effects.
- 7.1.2. Proposals for future monitoring of the effects of the FMP will be set out in the Environmental Report.

8. Consultation and Next Steps

- 8.1.1. Information and advice provided by the NIEA SEA Team (consultation body) will be carefully considered and fed into the SEA and the draft FMP as appropriate. The response from the consultation body on this present scoping report will be included as an appendix to the Environmental Report.
- 8.1.2. The consultation document, draft FMP and the Environmental Report will be prepared in advance of a public consultation in late spring/early summer 2023 to comply with regulation 13 of the SEA Regulations 2004.
- 8.1.3. Any responses received during the public consultation will be analysed and used to inform the further development of the FMP. DAERA is aiming to publish the Irish Sea Demersal FMP by the end of 2024.

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Appendix A: The descriptors used by the UK Marine Strategy to provide a framework to assess Good Environmental Status

D1 - Biological diversity (cetaceans, seals, birds, fish, pelagic habitats and benthic habitats)

D2 - Non-indigenous species

D3 - Commercially exploited fish and shellfish

D4 - Food webs (cetaceans, seals, birds, fish and pelagic habitats)

D5 - Eutrophication

D6 - Sea-floor integrity (pelagic habitats and benthic habitats)

D7 - Hydrographical conditions

D8 - Contaminants

D9 - Contaminants in fish and other seafood for human consumption

D10 - Litter

D11 - Introduction of energy, including underwater noise