



Department  
for Environment,  
Food & Rural Affairs

Consultation outcome

# Government response

Updated 31 January 2024

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A public consultation on spatial management measures on sandeel fishing in English waters of the North Sea was undertaken by Defra from 6 March to 30 May 2023. This followed a call for evidence in 2021 which disclosed that many stakeholders are concerned about the effect which the removal of forage fish by industrial fishing has on the wider marine environment.

The UK government has considered the evidence set out in the expert reports that were published alongside the public consultation, the responses to our consultation about potential measures, and the response from the International Council for the Exploration of the Sea (ICES) to a technical request on ecosystem considerations in the provision of single stock advice for forage fish species.

We note that:

- the expert report indicates that a prohibition of fishing for sandeel in the North Sea would deliver benefits to seabirds, other species of fish, as well as marine mammals
- amidst the ongoing avian flu outbreak and recognising the limited actions government can take to address the virus spread directly, management of the sandeel fishery could be an important step in increasing seabird resilience more widely
- over 95% of respondents support some form of prohibition on fishing for sandeel in English waters of the North Sea, with a majority favouring the closure of all English waters

We note that the ICES response to the technical request:

- sets out that annual ICES advice for sandeel management does not account fully for predator needs
- supports the use of regulation to ensure management delivers for local ecosystem needs
- suggests that the annual advice should be only part of an overall management regime to ensure that local food availability is preserved

Measures to increase food availability will therefore improve the resilience of marine life for which sandeels are a crucial source of nutrients. We acknowledge the responses from some stakeholders who will be directly affected by a prohibition and recognise the impact it could have on their businesses. However, there is sufficient evidence supporting an increase of benefits to the marine ecosystem to introduce a spatial closure.

The UK government has therefore decided to prohibit the fishing of sandeels within English waters of ICES Area 4 (North Sea). This measure will apply to all vessels of any nationality, and it will be effective from 26 March 2024, before the start of the next sandeel fishing season.

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