



Llywodraeth Cymru
Welsh Government

MEETING, DOCUMENT

Wales Sea Bass Advisory Group meeting: 5 December 2024

Notes of the meeting held on 5 December 2024.

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Attendees

Group

Kevin Denman (KD)
Mark Boulton (MB*)
Sion Williams (SW)
Chris Davies (CD)
Jim Evans (JE)
Brett Garner (BG)
Holly Kaiser (HK)
David Curtis (DC)
Simon Frobisher (SF)
Sean Dukes (SD)
Richard Harrison (RH)
Colin Charman (CC)
Peter Elliott (PE)
Hannah Rudd (HR)
John O'Connor (JO)
Mark Owen (MO)

Welsh Government

Michelle Billing (MB)
Julian Bray (JB)
Seb Evans (SE)

Apologies

Matt Sayer (MS)
Kieran Hyder (KH)
Nathan Wyer (NW)

Notes

Welcome and introductions, purpose of meeting

JB welcomed everyone to the seventh meeting of the group and relayed apologies from MS, KH and NW.

DC asked if his email prior to the meeting could be reflected in the agenda.

JB confirmed he would address the email as part of the agenda and in AOB.

Review and sign-off notes and actions of previous meetings, including final version of shore-based netting review

MB thanked members for comments received and asked if the group was content that the notes and actions now fully reflected the previous meetings.

A member asked for a few more days to consider the meeting 6 minutes.

It was agreed any further comments must be submitted in writing by Monday 9 December 2024 and all notes will be published on the website as soon as practicable.

MB confirmed the study into alternative harvest strategies, which was discussed in the previous meeting, was being carried out in house. NW has started the work and is hoping to share a draft in the new year.

A member queried why the study is not on the implementation plan.

MB explained this was a high-level version of the implementation plan and therefore did not detail individual pieces of work.

MB also explained that the comments regarding other netting methods in the shore-based netting (SBN) review document have not been included as it is a

high-level review. The additional details received have been kept for internal reference.

A member commented that they were content with the review document and that it was indeed a review, not a recommendation document.

JE mentioned that he had a few minor suggestions which he'll send in separately.

Action 1: Members to submit any further comments in writing by Monday 9 December.

Action 2: Notify members when previous notes and actions are published on the website.

Bass Fisheries Management Plan (FMP): year in review

JB thanked everyone for attending the group meetings over the past year. He noted the high level of engagement and reflected on what had been accomplished in the year:

WSBAG established:

- first met 23 January - seventh meeting of the group
- a diverse group resulting in open and constructive discussions

Progress so far:

- agreed Terms of Reference (ToR) which are on our website
- agreed an overview of the FMP which highlights our priority actions
- 5 meetings looking at evidence before agreeing our evidence priorities
- conducted a shore based netting review
- worked with Defra to ensure a Statutory Instrument (SI) will come into force on 16 December to enable commercial catch limits for bass to be varied

through fishing licence conditions (not through amending SI)

- agreed the initial implementation plan for delivery of the key actions with the Deputy First Minister (DFM)

JB concluded by saying the ToR and group membership will be reviewed in the new year.

JE also thanked the group and commented that in relation to license conditions through the SI, neither SBN nor recreational bag limits are covered, only commercial licence conditions.

JB asked if he was referring to how we may vary recreational bag limits in the future and whether there was an expectation for us to produce something to say how this might be done.

JE said it was unclear how recreational bag limits could be varied, i.e. changes needing to be evidence based and whether changes could be made during the year or only after the yearly negotiations.

JB agreed to get advice on this.

A member commented he felt illegal recreational angling was the issue. Anecdotal evidence was given of this in Carmarthen Bay, where recreational anglers are allegedly catching and selling bass to restaurants.

Another member highlighted that the commercial sector is monitored by the catch app, buyers and sellers' records, iVMS and the bass authorisation system.

He commented that the bass fishery could not be properly managed when there was unlimited access to the resource by the recreational sector and that accurate recreational landings data is needed so as to determine the sustainable number of bass which could be landed by recreational anglers each year.

JB acknowledged the evidence gaps in recreational angling have been recognised and will be the priority discussion in the new year.

In regard of recreational angling the following points were made:

- a member said he would like to explore the question of how an increase in bag limit could be done
- section 36 doesn't give the Fisheries Minister the power to make changes to legislation unless for sustainability reasons
- if a bass is sold, that is a commercial venture and cannot be recreational by definition
- the issue surrounding unregulated fishing from kayaks and yachts (unpowered vessels) was raised

TC (WG enforcement) clarified the rules regarding commercial fishing vessels are very strict and kayaks/yachts would be classed as recreational vessels.

TC acknowledged there is an element of commercial shore-based netting which is bycatch only, but no targeted rod and line commercial fishery from shore.

A member commented that illegal, unreported and unregulated (IUU) fishing needed to be stopped.

A member reported observing recent fishing activity of 2 commercial vessels and 8 recreational vessels. It was alleged the recreational vessels were targeting bass and supplying local establishments (anecdotal evidence). This had not been reported as the member felt no action would have been taken.

It was suggested, it might be useful to publish updates on action taken to increase confidence in enforcement. However, members acknowledged that disclosing enforcement data may compromise investigations.

It was also suggested that enforcement visits to pubs/restaurants reminding them of the rules around purchasing fish may help reduce incidences of IUU fishing by removing the market for the fish.

A charity in SW England who target bass using sailboats was flagged by a member who is also aware of kayakers who sell fish.

JB acknowledged the frustration of not seeing a direct response from enforcement but encouraged members to continue reporting such activity because enforcement is priority based and reporting all incidents will result in

action being taken.

JB agreed to take as an action and see what enforcement action was possible.

Action 3: Obtain advice on how recreational bag limits might be varied.

Action 4: Speak to enforcement about the monitoring of recreational bass boats in South Wales.

Initial implementation plan

MB confirmed the DFM had approved the delivery timeline, high-level implementation plan and call for evidence exercise.

MB shared the implementation plan and explained:

- the timeframes are estimates and subject to change
- the plan highlights the 'big ticket' items for the next 12-18 months, but not in any priority order
- completed work is also shown

JB said although it was unusual to share a plan with stakeholders it was fair to do so to give members a view of the work being done.

A member said he was surprised to see a plan put forward but was appreciative of the transparency.

A member queried why the socio-economic survey (included on the plan) was not on this meeting agenda and how, with a number of methods available for gathering such data, a survey had been chosen?

JB explained that colleagues from the Knowledge and Analytical Service (KAS) had been approached for advice on the method, and we would bring an outline of the approach to the group before the contract was let.

Action 5: Share outline of approach to socio-economic survey with the group before contract is let.

Call for Evidence: questions and timeframe

SE presented the draft call for evidence questions.

He highlighted the following points:

- the reference period for the questions is 2021 to 2024, as this is the period following the introduction of the exemption allowing commercial bycatch of bass in up to 50 shore-based nets in Wales
- the questions themselves have been designed to:
 - be comprehensive but not off putting to answer
 - not lead to respondents incriminating themselves

SE explained that at this stage in drafting the call for evidence document it was not expected the information gathered would be used for enforcement purposes.

SE went through each question in turn and asked the group for input. A copy of the [call for evidence document \(/call-evidence-shore-based-netting-wales\)](/call-evidence-shore-based-netting-wales) is available here.

Please note, the questions have been renumbered for publishing purposes. The new question numbers appear in brackets.

Only questions where comments were made are listed below. The key points were as follows:

- question 1 (6): include options for business status for commercial fishers, i.e. sole trader, partner. Add option for 'Observer of shore-netting'
- question 3 (11): important to understand the locations fished and the time of day
- question 4 (12): suggested this is reworded to capture how many days each year were fished
- question 6 (14): include a specific question on how much bycatch of bass was taken
- question 8 (16 to 18): maximise data gathered on nets used, i.e. length and

mesh size, number of nets used

- question 9 (19): expand question to capture different methods of shore-based netting
- question 10: move to Q1 (Q6) with type of commercial fisher.

A member suggested asking whether fishers/anglers recorded their SBN activity and if they did whether they would be willing to share the data with Welsh Government. Questions 20-21 have been added.

For respondents observing shore-based netting activity questions 24-25 have been added.

JB said every effort would be made to launch the call for evidence on Monday 16 December for a period of 8 weeks.

Action 6: Consider amendments to the draft call for evidence document.

Voluntary catch recording system: proposal & information fields

MB introduced the work NW has started on developing an online voluntary catch recording system (VCRS).

NW has discussed options with the Digital Systems and Data team and confirmed the CatchApp cannot be modified for reporting discards and shore-based net catches. He is currently discussing adapting the digital permit system which is used for whelk, crab and lobster etc.

JB explained the call for evidence is asking for information about what has happened in the past and the proposed VCRS is asking for current data. The call for evidence asks if people would be willing to use a VCRS and responses will be considered in the development of the system. We are, however, giving some early thought as to what a VCRS might look like.

MB explained we have limited the number of questions to encourage participation and want to use the meeting as an opportunity to get the members

input on the questions.

MB ran through the proposed questions and the following comments were made:

When did you retrieve your nets?

A member advised nets can be left in situ for 3-5 days and checked on every tide. Ideally, the catch recording system would record 2 landings per day. An alternative When were your nets retrieved and how many days did they fish for, was suggested. This is complicated question for the system so, for simplicity, the form asks:

- when did you set your net?
- when did you retrieve your net?

A member asked how the VCRS met the UK commitment to introduce catch reporting for shore-based netters (Written Record June 2012). The member was concerned that:

1. Little evidence would come forward;
2. A cost benefit analysis would be difficult;
3. The commitment to deliver catch reporting to the EU was not being met; and
4. Questioned why Wales was not introducing mandatory catch reporting as was done in England.

JB reminded members the agreement with the EU was to set up a system for catch reporting and monitoring SBN activity and reiterated the need for evidence to better understand the scale of the activity before considering potential measures.

JB confirmed the proposed voluntary system was a catch reporting system and our approach will be put to the EU.

The following points are noted from the open discussion:

- specialised committee on Fisheries minutes: the EU noted the UK's intention

to review inshore netting in future. This was seen as a positive development

- a member representing the commercial sector said the sector welcomed the FMP and the way things are progressing. The call for evidence and VCRS would give commercial fishers and recreational anglers the opportunity to respond
- the SBN review paper highlights the evidence gaps. Priority now is how to collect data as quickly as possible to be able to inform potential measures. Legislation takes time so voluntary measures are a quicker step in right direction
- offering formal recognition to SBN through catch reporting may encourage legitimate fishers to report illegal activity
- a mandatory catch reporting system will require legislation, and legislation must be based on evidence
- a member voiced the opinion that recreational fishers regard Wales and shore-netting as the 'wild west', an unregulated fishery with unreported catches and poor fisheries management
- JB explained the need for perspective. SBN is carried out by a relatively small number of fishers but there are evidence gaps to be addressed. This is compared to recreational angling where there are approximately 60k anglers in Wales of which less than 1% are providing data
- commercial fishers would be keen to contribute to prove a good track record
- South Wales based shore-netters have calculated that from the Severn bridge to Milford Haven, there are only about 7 individuals active. The main netting area is Loughor and Carmarthen Bay as prohibited from netting from Gower all the way round. Estimate 7 are active at any one time in the main area and about half have commercial vessels (anecdotal evidence)
- a member asked when the next specialised fisheries committee is. JB will find out but will likely have a conversation with the EU before the next committee

Action 7: Consider amendments to the draft voluntary catch recording system document.

Recreational data: Introduce upcoming work on recreational data and evidence gaps

MB explained work to address the recreational data and evidence gaps would start in the new year.

At the September meeting the advisory group had agreed to roll the 3 areas for improving the quality of recreational data into one package:

- increasing the level of participation in data recording, i.e. the sea angling diaries
- exploring opportunities to strengthen existing and develop new recording systems, and
- to encourage our UK and EU partners to support recreational data collection

MB summarised the information provided in previous meetings:

- recreational angling is the biggest evidence gap
- there are approximately 60,000 Welsh anglers, yet only 433 actively report in the sea angling diaries. This represents less than 1% of anglers
- in 2021 anglers in Wales retained 480,000 fish and released 2.3 million fish
- additionally, anglers in the Irish Sea retained 50,000kg and released 120,000kg of fish

This represents a significant level of removals by recreational anglers, Cefas figures suggest approximately 30%.

As with the work done so far the group will be asked for input through their advisory roles and also their knowledge and expertise in the systems and data capture currently available.

A brief discussion highlighted the following points which the advisory group will seek to address:

- scepticism among recreational anglers about what the data will be used for
- perception based on previous experience that data will be used to impose

restrictions

- will need to get across the value of the data – why it is needed and what benefits it could bring to recreational anglers
- there was some surprise that engagement is as high as 1%

Next steps, AOB, date of next meeting

A member asked if there was an update on the 2025 bass fishing opportunities.

JB agreed to notify all members when the latest information was published.

The member also raised a concern about the recently published strategic approach to Welsh fisheries and aquaculture and the absence of anything about recreational fishing. The member referred to an email sent in November asking for comments to be considered in the drafting of the strategic approach.

JB confirmed these had been passed on to the people working on the statement and said if the member would like to submit further comments in writing these would also be forwarded.

JB said it was likely the strategic approach would be discussed at the next Ministerial Advisory Group for Welsh Fisheries (MAGWF). The member of the WSBAG who sits on the MAGWF could raise this for discussion.

Action 8: Notify members when 2025 fishing opportunities information is published.

Actions

1. Members to submit any further comments in writing by Monday 9 December.
All: completed 9 December 2024.
2. Notify members when previous notes and actions are published on the website. SE: completed 20 January 2025.
3. Obtain advice on how recreational bag limits might be varied. JB: ongoing.

4. Speak to enforcement about the monitoring of recreational bass boats in South Wales. JB: ongoing.
5. Share outline of approach to socio-economic survey with the group before contract is let. MB: completed 6 June 2025.
6. Consider amendments to the draft call for evidence document. SE: completed 9 December 2024.
7. Consider amendments to the draft voluntary catch recording system document. NW: ongoing
8. Notify members when 2025 fishing opportunities information is published. SE: completed 18 December 2024.

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