COASTAL RESTORATION TRUST

2026

The year the seagrass came back

Twelve months of planting, counting, arguing and waiting — told through the people who did the work and the numbers that finally moved.

61 ha	2,340	£4.1M	88%
SEABED RESTORED	VOLUNTEER DAYS	INCOME	SURVIVAL RATE

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Figures in this review cover the financial year 1 April 2025 to 31 March 2026. Full audited accounts are published separately.

01

The water

Six years of planting, one good summer, and the first evidence that the meadow is now reproducing without us.

A meadow that plants itself

In August a survey team counted flowering shoots in the eastern bed for the fourth year running. The number they came back with — 41,000 per hectare, against 6,200 in 2023 — is the first hard evidence that the meadow has stopped being a garden and started being an ecosystem.

Seagrass restoration is a strange discipline. For the first several years, everything you measure is really a measure of your own effort: how many seed bags you deployed, how many shoots survived the winter, how much of the seabed you covered. None of it tells you whether the meadow will persist once you stop, and the honest answer for most of that period is that nobody knows.

The transition we have been waiting for is the point at which natural recruitment — plants growing from seed the meadow produced itself — exceeds what we plant by hand. This year, in the eastern bed, it did. Roughly 62% of new shoots counted in the August survey grew from seed we did not put there. In the western bed, planted three years later and in rougher water, the figure is 11% and rising more slowly than we hoped.

This matters beyond our own estuary because it gives a defensible answer to the question every funder asks: how long do you have to keep paying? For this site, on this substrate, at this depth, the answer appears to be about six years to self-sustaining recruitment. That is a number other projects can plan against.

61 ha

TOTAL RESTORED

Up from 44 ha last year; 12 ha of that is now classed as self-recruiting.

88%

OVERWINTER SURVIVAL

Highest since the project began. Two mild winters have flattered the figure.

41,000

FLOWERING SHOOTS / HA

Eastern bed, August survey. 6,200 in 2023.

WHAT THE DIVERS FOUND

The August survey ran over eleven days with four dive pairs and a volunteer surface team. Beyond the shoot counts, two observations stood out. The first is that sediment on the eastern bed is now measurably finer and more stable, which is exactly the feedback loop restoration depends on: grass slows the water, the water drops its silt, the silt holds the grass.

The second is less welcome. In three transects at the mouth of the channel, we recorded scarring consistent with anchor drag — narrow, straight, and unmistakable. Each scar removes perhaps forty square metres of established meadow and takes two to three years to close. We have raised this with the harbour authority and a voluntary no-anchor zone is under discussion.

THE FISH CAME WITH IT

Seine netting in the eastern bed recorded juvenile bass at densities four times those of the adjacent bare sediment, along with cuttlefish egg clusters attached to shoots in numbers nobody on the team had seen before at this site. We are careful about causal claims from a single season, but the direction of travel is consistent with every other recovered meadow in the literature.

- **Juvenile bass** — 4.1× the density of adjacent bare seabed
- **Cuttlefish egg clusters** — recorded at nine of twelve survey points
- **Sediment carbon** — 0.9% higher in restored plots than controls, within the expected range

62%

of new shoots in the eastern bed this year grew from seed the meadow produced itself. Six years ago that figure was zero, and the bed was bare sand.

> *“We used to describe success as survival. Now we can describe it as reproduction, and that is a completely different conversation with a funder.”*
>
> DR HELEN OKAFOR, HEAD OF SCIENCE

The eastern bed is not finished. Self-recruitment is a threshold, not a guarantee, and a single bad storm season or a summer heat event could still set it back years. But for the first time since 2020 the project has a plausible end state that does not involve us.

02

The people

Two thousand three hundred volunteer days, one difficult public meeting, and the beginning of a working relationship with the fishing fleet.

Trust is built at low tide

The technical problem in seagrass restoration is largely solved. The remaining problem is that meadows grow in water people use, and the people who use it were not consulted the first time conservation came to this estuary.

When the trust started work here in 2019, the local fishing association opposed us, and they were right to be suspicious. The last marine designation in this estuary arrived as a consultation nobody could attend, followed by a byelaw that closed ground three families had worked for a generation. Our first two years were spent, largely unsuccessfully, explaining that we were not that.

What changed was not a communications strategy. It was a boat. In 2023 we started paying local skippers commercial day rates to run survey and deployment work rather than bringing our own vessel down from the north. The money mattered, but the more important effect was that four skippers spent forty days each on the water watching what we actually did — and then explained it to everyone else, far more credibly than we could have.

This year the association put a representative on our restoration advisory group for the first time, and it was their proposal, not ours, that produced the voluntary no-anchor zone now under discussion with the harbour authority. That is a better outcome than anything we would have achieved by pressing for regulation, and it took seven years.

2,340

VOLUNTEER DAYS

Across 410 individuals; 38% returned from the previous year.

14

SCHOOLS ENGAGED

Nine within five miles of the estuary; 1,100 pupils in total.

40 days

PAID LOCAL BOAT WORK

Four skippers, commercial rates, £61,000 into the local fleet.

THE VOLUNTEER PROGRAMME

Seed collection remains our largest volunteer activity and the one with the steepest learning curve: pickers work from small boats in July, selecting reproductive shoots without damaging the parent plant. It takes about three sessions before a new volunteer is quick enough to be useful, which is why retention matters more to us than recruitment.

Retention this year was 38%, up from 29%. The change we credit most is the least glamorous: we started publishing the survey results back to the people who collected the seed, by name, with the numbers their bags produced. Volunteers who can see what their work became come back.

THE DIFFICULT MEETING

In November we held a public meeting in Ardmore about proposed extensions to the western bed. It went badly. Roughly sixty people attended and the strongest objection — that the extension would sit across a traditional launching line used by small boats — was one we had genuinely failed to anticipate, because it appears on no chart we had consulted.

We withdrew the proposal, spent four months surveying actual small-boat use with the people who do it, and returned in March with a revised footprint that avoids the line entirely and is 4 hectares smaller. It was approved without objection. The delay cost us a planting season. It was the right trade.

> *“You cannot restore a habitat over the objections of the people who work on top of it. You can only do it slowly, with them, and slowly is not a failure of the method.”*
>
> MARCUS DELANEY, CHIEF EXECUTIVE

Our commitment for the coming year is procedural rather than ecological: no new footprint goes to public consultation until it has been walked through with the fishing association and the small-boat users first. That is slower. It is also, as this year demonstrated, faster.

03

The money

A larger, less balanced income than we would like, and a deliberate decision to spend down reserves on the western bed.

Where £4.1 million came from

Income rose 18% to £4.1 million, driven almost entirely by a single five-year restoration grant. That concentration is the central financial risk in this review and the board has asked for it to be stated plainly.

Restricted grant funding now accounts for 64% of income, up from 51% two years ago. Grants of that size make ambitious work possible and make an organisation fragile in a specific way: the work they fund creates ongoing monitoring obligations that outlast the grant by a decade. We are funding six-year plantings with five-year money and covering the difference from reserves.

Unrestricted income — memberships, corporate partnerships, the small legacy programme — grew 9% to £610,000. That is real progress but nowhere near the level needed to carry monitoring costs on its own, and closing that gap is the fundraising priority for the coming three years.

Expenditure of £3.8 million included a deliberate £340,000 draw on reserves to bring forward the western bed extension by a full planting season, a decision the board approved in January on the grounds that a season lost to funding timing is a season the meadow does not get back. Reserves stand at 5.1 months of operating costs against a policy minimum of four.

WHAT IT BOUGHT

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- **£2.30M — restoration delivery.** Seed collection, deployment, boat charter and the dive programme.
- **£640,000 — science and monitoring.** Four permanent staff, survey equipment and the long-term data programme.
- **£420,000 — community and education.** The volunteer programme, schools work and the advisory group.

- **£310,000 — fundraising.** A ratio of 7.6p per pound raised, broadly flat on last year.
- **£130,000 — governance and support.** Audit, insurance, legal and the trustee programme.

64%

of income now comes from restricted restoration grants. Reducing that concentration is the single most important financial objective in our 2027–2029 plan.

SOURCE	2026	2025	SHARE
Restricted restoration grants	£2,620,000	£1,980,000	64%
Public bodies and agencies	£540,000	£610,000	13%
Corporate partnerships	£330,000	£286,000	8%
Membership and donations	£280,000	£262,000	7%
Legacies	£210,000	£184,000	5%
Other trading and interest	£120,000	£148,000	3%

The trustees are satisfied that the charity remains a going concern and that reserves, while drawn down deliberately this year, remain within policy. The full audited accounts, including the trustees' report and the auditor's opinion, are published alongside this review.

What we will do next

Three commitments for 2027. First, complete the western bed extension on the revised footprint and hold the planting schedule even if the funding timing is awkward. Second, publish the six-year recruitment dataset openly, including the seasons that went badly, so other projects can plan against real numbers rather than our best ones. Third, grow unrestricted income by a third, because the monitoring obligation we have created will outlast every grant currently on our books.

None of this year's results belong to the trust alone. They belong to 410 volunteers, four skippers, a fishing association that had every reason to stay sceptical, and a science team that has spent six years counting shoots in cold water. Thank you.

Marcus Delaney
Chief Executive

Priya Raman
Chair of Trustees

Coastal Restoration Trust · Harbour Buildings, Ardmore · Registered charity no. 1184620
Full audited accounts and the six-year recruitment dataset are available on request.