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Llywodraeth Cymru
Welsh Government

Ein cyf/Our ref

Llyr Gruffydd MS
Chair
Climate Change, Environment & Rural Infrastructure Committee
Welsh Parliament
Cardiff
CF99 1SN

1 December 2021

Dear Llyr,

Thank you for your letter of 2 November seeking an update on progress regarding the recommendations outlined in the Climate Change, Environment and Rural Affairs Committee report 'The Welsh Government's progress on Marine Protected Area management'.

Attached to this letter, I have provided an update to each of the recommendations taken forward. Furthermore, I attach an update regarding our Blue Carbon programme in Wales and developments with marine spatial planning.

Yours sincerely

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Rydym yn croesawu derbyn gohebiaeth yn Gymraeg. Byddwn yn ateb gohebiaeth a dderbynnir yn Gymraeg yn Gymraeg ac ni fydd gohebu yn Gymraeg yn arwain at oedi.

We welcome receiving correspondence in Welsh. Any correspondence received in Welsh will be answered in Welsh and corresponding in Welsh will not lead to a delay in responding.

Recommendation 1

The Welsh Government should bring forward as a matter of urgency an ambitious strategy for MPAs. It should do so by summer 2020. The strategy should focus on the need to take both local and network-scale approaches and to deliver the conservation objectives of individual MPAs, where applicable. The framework and action plan should sit under the strategy. The strategy should be accompanied by an explanation of how the Welsh Government plans to fund MPA Management on an ongoing basis. The strategy should be subject to full consultation and should be refreshed periodically.

Response

This recommendation was rejected by the Minister for Environment and Rural Affairs.

Recommendation 2

The Welsh Government should discuss with the MPA Management Steering Group how it can receive input from a broader stakeholder base and additional MPA management authorities. This could include broadening the group out to include additional members or the creation of relevant sub-groups. The Welsh Government should report back to this Committee on the outcome of those discussions.

Response

In a previous Ministerial role, the Minister for Environment and Rural Affairs established the MPA Network Management Steering Group in 2014 to provide overarching advice and guidance for the management of our MPA network. I consider this group to have appropriate representation from a broad range of stakeholders whom have a breadth of expertise to lead the management of our MPA network. The steering group is continuing to deliver its substantive function and has overseen some valuable and beneficial projects within the MPA Network Management Action Plans.

My officials established the Marine Resilience sub-group of WMAAG to allow wider discussions and consideration to marine biodiversity policy. The Marine Resilience sub-group allows for a broader membership with multiple interests and reports back to both WMAAG and the MPA Network Management Steering Group.

Recommendation 3

The Welsh Government should explore whether duties for Welsh Ministers, similar to those placed on English Inshore Fisheries and Conservation Authorities under the Marine and Coastal Access Act (2009), should be introduced in Wales and should report back to the Committee on this matter.

Response

In a previous Ministerial role, the Minister for Environment and Rural Affairs published the report on Brexit and Our Seas and issued a written statement: [Written Statement: A response to the Brexit and our Seas consultation and the next steps towards a future fisheries policy for Wales \(15 September 2020\) | GOV.WALES](#)

The Welsh Government remains committed to delivering a strategic approach to both fisheries and aquaculture and developing future fisheries policy in collaboration with stakeholders.

Recommendation 4

The Welsh Government should develop proposals, in consultation with the MPA Management Steering Group, for an area-based approach that would see management authorities put in an amount of money to the pot which is proportionate to the protected area for which they have responsibility. The funding for this should be in addition to, rather than instead of, funding for actions in the Action Plan.

Response

This recommendation was rejected by the Minister for Environment and Rural Affairs.

Recommendation 5

The Welsh Government should consider how the Marine and Fisheries Division will, in discussion with the five Welsh Relevant Authority Groups (RAGs), develop a more integrated approach to working with RAGs.

Response

Since the establishment of the MPA Network Management Steering group, membership has included several SAC Relevant Authority Groups (RAGs) in addition to a European Marine Site Officer (EMSO) offering an advisory role to the group.

My officials have explored options for further engagement and inclusion for RAGs through WMAAG and I can confirm RAG members are now well represented in WMAAG and the WMAAG Resilience sub-group.

Recommendation 6

The Welsh Government should identify the specific number of staff in the Marine Conservation Branch of the Marine and Fisheries Division and report back to this Committee.

Response

Civil service staffing is a matter for the Permanent Secretary. I have asked the Permanent Secretary to write to you on this matter.

Recommendation 7

The Welsh Government must ensure that marine biodiversity and conservation are reflected in its forthcoming tourism strategy.

Response

The Welsh Government's Tourism Priorities for the Visitor Economy for 2020-25 was published by the Deputy Minister for Culture, Sport in 2020. One of the core aims of the strategy is to develop tourism in Wales allowing economic benefit, but is environmentally sustainable, including the marine environment.

The Strategy promotes 'Environmental Sustainability', and in particular our natural resources. My officials commit to working with organisations involved in the protection and management of our outstanding landscapes, including the marine environment, to ensure this aim can be delivered.

My officials collaborate with Tourism Division and Visit Wales who are also a member of WMAAG. Members are closely involved in the development of the 'Blue Recovery Implementation Plan' which aims to enhance resilience in our marine environment.

Recommendation 8

The Welsh Government should write to marine wildlife tourism sector representatives to invite them onto the WMAAG (Wales Marine Action and Advisory Group) and should provide an update on the progress of the establishment of a Biodiversity sub-group of the WMAAG.

Response

My officials discussed this recommendation with WMAAG members to suggest a suitable representative for the sector. It was agreed there is not one organisation representing the marine wildlife tourism sector and concluded the group has suitable representation, including organisations such as RSPB and Wildlife Trusts Wales who are engaged in wildlife tourism.

The Minister for Climate Change recently met with WMAAG members and fully supported their Blue Recovery proposals. The Minister has asked members to work with officials to develop an Implementation Plan for delivery this Senedd term.

It is intended the plan will set out the delivery of the Programme for Government commitments, and current and planned WG work, but also encompass work to address ocean literacy, capacity building and long term sustainable investment in resilient marine ecosystems, providing a joined up approach to addressing the climate change and nature emergencies.

The group will be engaging more widely with stakeholders as part of its latest mandate to develop a Blue Recovery Implementation Plan.

Recommendation 9

The Welsh Government should explain why management has not yet been implemented as a result of the AWFA assessments for high-risk activities, which were published in 2017. It should bring forward a consultation on management options for those activities as a matter of urgency. The Welsh Government should agree a timetable with NRW for the completion of the remaining assessments, but this should be no later than January 2021. The Welsh Government should assess the level of resources that will be needed by NRW to complete this work.

Response

Welsh Government continue to work with NRW to progress the Assessing Welsh Fishing Activities project. In 2016, 516 assessments of gear-feature interactions were prioritised for delivery. Of these, 70 have been received from NRW with a further 39 medium priority bottom towed gear assessments due for delivery in March 2022.

The Assessing Welsh Fishing Activities project remains a priority and I will launch a public consultation once all towed gear assessments are completed and proposals for management measures are finalised.

Recommendation 10

The Welsh Government should explore the desirability of making the production of site-level feature condition reports and the collection of relevant monitoring information a statutory requirement.

Response

Site level monitoring data and reports are critical to understanding the condition of MPAs in Wales. They inform the evidence base supporting effective management and efforts to achieve and maintain the favourable condition of features.

There are multiple existing drivers for site level condition assessments in Wales, including: regulation 9A of the Conservation of Habitats and Species Regulations 2017; regulation 6A of the Conservation of Offshore Habitats and Species Regulations; section 124 reporting on the MPA network by the Welsh Ministers to the Senedd under the Marine and Coastal Access Act 2009; the State of Natural Resources Report under the Environment (Wales) Act 2016; regulations 10 and 13 of the Marine Strategy Regulations 2010; and feature level reporting by UK Government to the OSPAR Commission. Whilst these do not state specific statutory requirements, it should be recognised that they drive site level condition assessment as this is a key way to achieve the overall reporting outcomes required. NRW has reviewed the approach to MPA site condition assessments through the EMFF funded Improving Marine Site-level Condition Assessment Reporting project. The findings of this project and the process developed will be embedded within the NRW reporting obligations in a 6 yearly cycle.

Recommendation 11

The Welsh Government should ensure that MPA evidence gaps are addressed through the implementation of the Marine Evidence and Fisheries Evidence Plans.

Response

Welsh Government continue to work closely with NRW, JNCC and wider stakeholders to develop our marine evidence base and monitor progress towards fulfilling evidence needs highlighted within the Welsh Marine Evidence Strategy. This includes science and evidence required for delivery of our MPA network obligation.

Recommendation 12

The Welsh Government should report back on the progress of the work of the Task and Finish Group established to identify potential MCZs. The Welsh Government should ask the Task and Finish Group to bring forward proposals for consultation as soon as possible, but no later than February 2020.

Response

The MCZ Task and Finish Group (TFG) and project team have continued to meet and work together on the identification of potential MCZs in Welsh waters and a series of virtual meetings have taken place.

The MPA Network Completion project remains a priority, however, I should note all Welsh Government departments are stretched at present primarily due to pressures as a result of our exit from the European Union and our response to the Covid-19 pandemic. This has put significant pressure on our resources and ability for officials to deliver other programmes of work. Officials will launch a pre-consultation engagement in early 2022 forming part of our evidence gathering ahead of a formal consultation.

I continue to be mindful of the need to ensure stakeholders and the public are properly engaged and consulted to ensure support. Timeframes for the project will reflect the legal requirement under Section 119(10) of the Marine and Coastal Access Act, 2009, concerning consulting before designating.

Recommendation 13

The Welsh Government should ask the Task and Finish Group to consider, as part of its work, the need for highly-protected MCZ designations. This consideration should be informed by extensive consultation with interested parties, such as fishers.

Response

This recommendation was rejected by the Minister for Environment and Rural Affairs.

Recommendation 14

The Welsh Government should ask the Task and Finish Group to develop a plan for designating MCZs for mobile species.

Response

I remain committed to exploring the need to designate MCZs in Wales as part of the MPA Network Completion project. The Task and Finish Group are taking a staged approach, focusing on habitats designations in the first instance. However, designations for mobile species remain part of the discussion for future consideration.

Recommendation 15

The Welsh Government should undertake or commission an assessment of the impact on MPA management of leaving the EU, including a potential loss of access to EU research, institutions and funding. In so doing, it should explain how it will mitigate any such impact.

Response

Of the £375m of regional annual funding Welsh Government received from the EU, £60m went into funding research development and innovation. The replacement Shared Prosperity Fund which the UK Government has promised will fully replace these lost funds, has not yet fully come into operation. It is not clear how this fund will be allocated to devolved administrations but I am concerned it will fall significantly short of the £375m we originally received.

Welsh Government remains committed to bring forward plans for an investment led recovery through delivering our programme for government, based on the needs of the people of Wales. We will publish the Welsh Government Budget on 20 December and will seek to deliver the fairest possible settlement for Welsh public services to secure a more prosperous and greener Wales.

Marine and Fisheries funding proposals on a successor scheme to the EMFF are still in development for 2022/23.

Investment through the EMFF successor scheme will contribute to the Welsh National Marine Plan, the Well-being of Future Generations (Wales) Act as well as the principles and specific commitments in the Programme for Government along with commitments made in the JFS and Fisheries Management Plans.

Update regarding marine spatial planning

The Welsh National Marine Plan (WNMP) was adopted by the Welsh Ministers in November 2019. Together with the UK Marine Policy Statement, it sets a strategic framework for the sustainable development of Welsh seas. Following publication, the WNMP was supplemented with Implementation Guidance, providing information to guide the practical

application of Plan policy and help ensure its effective and consistent implementation. Officials have worked with a range of public authorities to support Plan implementation. A Monitoring and Reporting Framework for the WNMP was published in January 2020, providing the basis for the first formal review and monitoring report on the Plan, due in 2022. Officials have conducted a User Survey to inform the report and intend to conduct a second User Survey in spring 2022.

Since the WNMP's publication, officials have worked with stakeholders to progress a spatial approach to the implementation of Plan policy, providing spatial direction and context for development.

Through the recently completed Sustainable Management of Marine Natural Resources (SMMNR) project, officials conducted seabed survey and ecological mapping to help inform the planning for the tidal stream energy, wave energy and aquaculture sectors. Interactive online environmental mapping and evidence package 'Storyboards' have been published to share the mapping methodology and project outputs, allowing users to focus on specific spatial areas or environmental considerations.

The SMMNR project outputs have been used, together with work to better understand the nature of potential cross-sector spatial interactions in Welsh seas, to develop Sector Locational Guidance (SLG) for the tidal stream energy, wave energy and aquaculture sectors. SLG, through providing clarity on the distribution of natural resources and associated considerations in relation to sustainable use, aims to help guide activity towards areas which may best accommodate new development without compromising the resilience of marine ecosystems.

As part of a spatial approach to supporting plan implementation, the Welsh Ministers have recently initiated work to map potential Strategic Resource Areas (SRAs) to identify and apply WNMP safeguarding policy to key areas of resource. The approach to identifying potential SRAs and design principles to guide SRA development have been co-developed with the Marine Planning Stakeholder Reference Group (MPSRG).

Welsh Government has also been providing marine planning input to a range of UK-wide initiatives to support the sustainable deployment of fixed and floating offshore wind. Looking ahead, we will publish SLG for the tidal stream, wave energy and aquaculture sectors and work with stakeholders to progress the development of potential SRAs, consulting on proposals. We will also report in 2022 on the effect of WNMP policies and progress towards achieving Plan objectives and, as part of this reporting process, consider the need to amend the WNMP or to re-plan in the context of the rapidly changing UK marine landscape.

Update regarding the emerging role of Blue Carbon in Wales

I recognise the increasingly important role blue carbon can play in addressing both the nature and the climate crises, and Net Zero Wales includes a new proposal to improve our understanding of both how we could account for the contribution it makes through the Greenhouse Gas Inventory, and the potential impacts of human activity and climate change itself on blue carbon habitats and emissions.

My officials are working closely with NRW, the other administrations and the scientific community to understand the issues and opportunities better, and we will work together with the intention to establish a UK Blue Carbon Evidence Partnership early next year, to address those questions. In Wales we will develop and deliver a shared blue carbon evidence plan both to direct the UK partnership and to inform specific Welsh evidence

needs. Discussions have begun around the potential to form a working group to progress this evidence plan.

In the meantime, through our Welsh Marine Protected Areas network and active decision making using the Welsh National Marine Plan we will continue to manage many of those habitats which maintain and enhance blue carbon.