

Marine Conservation Society briefing for debate on Climate Change, Environment, and Infrastructure Committee Report on the Welsh Government's marine policies May 2022

Marine Conservation Society (MCS) welcomes the recent report and recommendations from the Wales Climate Change, Environment and Infrastructure Committee on Welsh Government's Marine Policies.

Ahead of the forthcoming Senedd debate on, 18th May, MCS would like to share our initial thoughts on the next steps required to deliver the committee's recommendations for delivering sustainable management of Welsh waters.

Foremost, we would recommend that Welsh Government **sets out a clear Marine strategy, covering this sixth Senedd term** with time bound milestones and deliverables, that demonstrates how the different policy drivers align. **Creating a single overarching strategy will provide clear line of sight to the various components required to deliver effective marine management.** Such a strategy will enable greater collaboration between local stakeholders and actors across public, private and third sector to aid delivery of sustainable marine recovery.

MCS views on Committee Recommendations

Marine Planning (Recommendation 1)

- ***Welsh National Marine Plan Review should consider the need for a statutory, spatial and holistic Marine Development Plan.***

We support the recommendation for Welsh Government to commission an external analysis of the Wales National Marine Plan to inform its own review later in 2022. We would add that **this review considers the need for a statutory, spatial and holistic Marine Development Plan.** This plan would complement, not replace, the existing efforts the Welsh Government is taking to implement a more spatial approach.

Renewable Energy (Recommendations 3, 5 and 6)

- ***The renewable energy deep dive must take into consideration alone and in-combination impacts of human activities on the marine environment.***

- ***The Marine Energy Plan should include recommendations to deliver a just transition for other industries displaced by the deployment of renewable energy in Wales.***

The development of offshore energy must be done in a nature positive way to avoid increasing the threats to an already-degraded marine environment. Therefore, we look forward to Welsh Government reporting on progress to implement the renewable energy deep dive recommendations to the Committee. **The deep dive must take into consideration alone and in-combination impacts of human activities on the marine environment.** The deep dive should also consider the interactions between all elements of the Welsh Government marine work program (e.g. fishing, marine planning), and not report on these elements in isolation.

The updated Marine Energy Plan should include **clear recommendations to deliver a just transition for other industries displaced by the deployment of renewable energy in Wales.** The Economy Minister's statement on offshore marine energy, due on 17th May, is an opportunity to outline how Welsh Government will deliver a just transition.

On the tidal lagoon challenge, as well as the Welsh Government providing an update to the Committee, we ask that full consideration is given to the impacts of such developments on the marine environment and other activities. **Any future plans to develop Tidal lagoons in Welsh waters must be underpinned by a clear Marine Development Plan.**

Marine Evidence (Recommendations 9, 10, 11)

- ***The Welsh Marine Evidence Strategy is holistic in its approach to support cross-cutting themes.***

The Welsh Marine Evidence Strategy must be **holistic in its approach and able to support cross-cutting themes of Welsh Marine Governance**, whilst also ensuring that Wales continues to deliver towards ambitions shared by the four UK administrations to achieve Good Environmental status for UK seas.

We recommend that the Marine Evidence Strategy supports Welsh Government in identifying priority marine and terrestrial evidence gaps and mechanisms to fill them, as promised through the Renewable Energy deep dive.

Additionally, we propose that **future Marine Development licences require pre and post construction monitoring**, to enable how developers can make a greater contribution to the evidence base that underpins marine planning.

Marine Protected Areas (Recommendations 13, 14, 16)

- ***Deliver a MPA strategy, clarifying Welsh Government ambition and include clear management actions.***
- ***Deliver swifter action on future MPA designations.***

We support the recommendation that the Welsh Government bring forward a management strategy for Marine Protected Areas (MPAs). **This strategy should include clear management**

actions for the existing network and, where feasible, any sites considered in the forthcoming MCZ process. Having transparent management actions will enable stakeholders and communities to understand the purpose of each MPA, and aid in the development of clear plans to resolve issues arising from the potential displacement of existing activities. Welsh Government should accompany this strategy, with plans to deliver the continued funding of MPA Management, a process for periodic review and the opportunity for public consultation.

The strategy must also consider the interconnected nature of the sea to human activities on land, providing recommendations addressing issues such as water quality will be resolved at their source, not only at sea. More information on how these considerations will be incorporated into NRW's MPA Condition Improvement Programme would be welcomed.

Recommendation 14, that Welsh Government set out how the new NRW approach for site condition assessments will be funded, is key to delivering an effective reporting process. Welsh Government plans to explore the Nature Networks Programme as a potential funding avenue, is a positive step and we look forward to hearing more soon.

We agree with the committee that Welsh Government set a timetable for designation of future MPAs. **Wales has delayed progressing additional designations for marine protection and we believe action must now be swifter** if we are to address the dual threats of the climate and nature crises.

We welcome Welsh Government's continued commitment to the UK wide monitoring programme but seek clarity regarding what actions will be delivered in Welsh waters.

We are encouraged by the Minister's commitment to undertake a review of existing levels of protection, effectiveness of management, and to consider areas of higher protection as appropriate. Scottish Government is currently developing similar objectives, and we suggest Welsh Government considers the feasibility of such an approach in Welsh waters.

Fisheries (Recommendation 17)

- ***The Assessing Welsh Fishing Activities project must inform the delivery of an ecosystem based approach for the management of bottom towed gear.***

We support Welsh Government delivering a consultation on dredging and bottom trawling in Welsh MPAs. The Minister's response highlights that the Assessing Welsh Fishing Activities project as a necessary step towards any consultations on bottom trawling. We look forward to the results of this project, noting this should inform the purpose and timeline for a public consultation, and where appropriate, consider any fragile habitats outside current MPA boundaries to enable delivery of an ecosystem based management of Fisheries activities.

Any consultation on the future of bottom towed gear should identify where this activity is compatible, the number of boats able to fish at a sustainable level, and should the activity not be compatible in defined areas changes are delivered via just transition.

Blue Carbon (Recommendations 18, 19, 20)

- ***The development of a blue carbon evidence base does not delay or prevent action to protect, manage and restore blue carbon habitats in Welsh waters.***

We welcome all recommendations from the committee regarding blue carbon and are encouraged by the Minister's commitment to engage with this developing area of policy over the course of this session of the Senedd. **We ask that the development of an evidence base does not delay or prevent actions to protect, manage and restore blue carbon habitats both within and without the current MPA network.** Ensuring that Wales is taking every opportunity to effectively use its marine area to tackle the climate change threat.

Above all, we urge that these policies are implemented at pace and with continued stakeholder engagement. We hope you find these recommendations helpful and are able to use them to evaluate and question the Welsh Government's marine policies and priorities for the current session of the Senedd. For further detail, please contact:

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