

Written Response by the Welsh Government to the report of the Climate Change, Environment and Infrastructure Committee entitled Report on the Welsh Government marine policies.

Recommendation 1

The Committee recommends that

The Welsh Government should commission an external analysis of the Wales National Marine Plan to inform its own review later in 2022.

Response: Agree in principle

Welsh Government will this year report on the effectiveness of the Welsh National Marine Plan. We have collaborated with stakeholders to develop the plan monitoring framework and indicators against which to assess progress to ensure the report will be based upon on objective analysis of the available evidence. Given the recent introduction of the marine plan we anticipate limited evidence being available to inform a thorough assessment of progress. We agree in principle with the approach suggested in this recommendation and will commission an external analysis to inform the next statutory report.

Financial Implications – None

Recommendation 2

The Committee recommends that

The Welsh Government should ensure that stakeholder engagement is a central part of its review of the Wales National Marine Plan.

Response: Accept

Welsh Government is keen to ensure stakeholder engagement is a central part of the reporting process. We have collaborated with stakeholders to develop the plan monitoring framework and monitoring indicators, and have undertaken a public survey of plan effectiveness. We intend to repeat the public survey this year in advance of reporting, and will work through the Marine Planning Stakeholder Reference Group to discuss progress and next steps for marine planning as part of the reporting requirement.

Financial Implications – None

Recommendation 3

The Committee recommends that

The Welsh Government should report back to the Committee in 6-months on the progress of implementing the recommendations in the renewable energy deep dive.

Response: Accept

The deep dive recommendations contained short, medium and long-term goals and the Welsh Government agreed, through the deep dive process, to reconvene the deep dive group every two months so that Welsh Government could provide updates on progress against each of the recommendations. At the first meeting, held at the end of February, the group was happy with the progress made against the recommendations. Working groups to help drive progress have been and are being established.

Financial Implications – None

Recommendation 4

The Committee recommends that

The Welsh Government should set out its plans, including timescales, for the devolution of the management of the Crown Estate and its assets in.

Response: Accept

It was agreed in January 2022 that a meeting with the Crown Estate to discuss their operations in Wales, and consideration for a technical paper to be produced looking at the implications of devolution, would be arranged. Once this task has been completed we will be able to finalise our plans for the Crown Estate.

Financial Implications – None

Recommendation 5

The Committee recommends that

The Welsh Government should update the Marine Energy Plan to reflect its ambitions and intentions in this policy area.

Response: Accept in principle

The Welsh Government will review the Marine Energy Plan for Wales to consider whether and how it needs up-dating to reflect the latest position.

Financial Implications – None.

Recommendation 6

The Committee recommends that

The Welsh Government should provide an update to the Committee on the tidal lagoon challenge.

Response: Accept.

The Welsh Government will provide an update to the Committee on the tidal lagoon challenge as the project develops.

Financial Implications – None

Recommendation 7

The Committee recommends that

The Welsh Government should set out how its end-to-end review of the consenting process will be open and transparent and how stakeholders will be provided with an opportunity to contribute.

Response: Accept

Welsh Government is commissioning an independent contractor to undertake an end to end review of marine licensing to ensure it is open and transparent. It is critical that stakeholders have the opportunity to input to the review and this will be an integral part of the process. Stakeholder views are welcome on any aspect of marine licensing delivery, and ways to input these will be agreed with the contractor once in place.

Financial Implications – None. £300,000 has already been allocated for the review from the 2022-23 budget.

Recommendation 8

The Committee recommends that

The Welsh Government should provide further information, including a timeline, for delegating offshore advisory powers from the Joint Nature Conservation Committee (JNCC) to NRW. The Welsh Government must ensure that NRW is adequately resourced to deliver these additional responsibilities.

Response: Accept in principle

Discussions have been held and are on-going between JNCC and NRW, and with WG officials in both Marine and Energy Policy branches. The initial focus is a review of a selection of options that would deliver this recommendation, supported by details from Scotland and England where this change has previously happened, information on the forecast of marine renewables work in Welsh waters and an assessment of necessary resources. These options will be used to agree a preferred option, which will then be scoped out to provide a delivery plan including timelines. Resourcing will be considered as part of the scoping process.

Financial Implications – None.

Recommendation 9

The Committee recommends that

The Welsh Government should set out how it will deliver on the commitment in the renewable energy deep-dive to identifying priority marine and terrestrial evidence gaps and mechanisms to fill them. This should include information on how such work will be funded.

Response: Accept

Welsh Government have been in discussions with NRW and identified the gaps around marine evidence, which largely relates to evidence on interaction between a technology and the environment. We have agreed that NRW will provide a timeline for identifying and filling existing evidence gaps for energy projects on shore through the deep dive process. However, this will be an evolving picture as new technologies are developed and become commercialised.

We will continue to implement a spatial approach to marine planning, working with NRW to understand ecological constraints and opportunities. In addition, we will map socio-economic spatial considerations and identify spatial evidence gaps and mechanisms to fill them as part of marine planning. We will publish a report on addressing strategic baseline evidence gaps for renewable energy technologies, and a series of information

notes that will identify topic specific evidence gaps in relation to developing tidal stream energy technologies.

Financial Implications – None

Recommendation 10

The Committee recommends that

The Welsh Government should set out how developers can make a greater contribution to the evidence base that underpins marine planning. It should set out how it will remove barriers to ensure that data can be shared while respecting commercial confidentiality.

Response: Accept

Marine planning is an evidence based process and developers can make an important contribution towards our understanding of the marine environment and future marine planning. The Welsh Marine National Plan encourages the sharing of evidence and encourages sectors to collaborate to understand opportunities for sustainable development by addressing key evidence gaps.

It is important that we maximise learning from developments that are progressed, ensuring new data can feed back into future decision making including the accuracy of predicted effects and how this can inform future assessments.

Welsh Government is considering how any barriers to data sharing can best be addressed. We are a part of the UK Productive Seas Evidence Group which has actively considered this matter. We are also supportive of The Crown Estate Marine Data Exchange initiative which makes available data from the marine renewables and aggregates industry.

We agree that this matter merits further action and will set out in the next revision of the Welsh Government Marine Evidence Strategy how we can work with industry to take this forwards.

Financial Implications – none at this stage.

Recommendation 11

The Committee recommends that

The Welsh Government should provide an update on the Welsh Marine Evidence Strategy 2019-22, including any assessment that has been undertaken of its effectiveness, and whether the Strategy will be reviewed or amended in the light of the commitment in the renewable energy deep-dive.

Response: Accept

Welsh Government Officials would be happy to provide a mid-term update on delivery of the Welsh Marine Evidence Strategy, whilst acknowledging that the evidence needs identified are not for Welsh Government to deliver alone. The strategy aimed to set the direction and areas of evidence needs required over this six-year period.

Welsh Government have reviewed the need to update the Welsh Marine Evidence Strategy 2019-2025 document in light of emerging evidence needs. Officials are content

that the overarching strategic evidence priorities still represent the high-level evidence needs including those identified by the deep dive.

Progress in delivering the Welsh Marine Evidence Strategy is being monitored through the Welsh Marine Evidence Strategy Panel. Completion of marine, fisheries and aquaculture evidence projects led or contributed to by Welsh Government is also being captured in three internal two-year Evidence Plans, which are reviewed annually and formally evaluated at the end of each plans conclusion.

Financial Implications – None.

Recommendation 12

The Committee recommends that

The Welsh Government should bring forward a strategy for Marine Protected Areas. It should focus on the need to take both local and network-scale approaches and to deliver the conservation objectives of individual MPAs, where applicable.

Response: Accept in Principle.

I agree with the principles the committee have set out in the recommendation, and I am committed to both local and network scale approaches. At this stage I am not considering a standalone strategy, but rather ensuring the current strategic approach set out in the MPA Network Management Framework is built on and incorporated into our future long term strategies and plans for resilient ecological networks. This includes the Nature Networks Programme and UK Marine Strategy.

Our MPA Network Management Framework sets out a clear strategic approach through effective management principles for enhancing the resilience of our MPA network and ensuring features maintain or move towards a favourable condition. A number of successful actions have been delivered through the framework and future actions are now supported by the MPA Network Management grant scheme. The committee will be aware the Framework is due for renewal in 2023. Welsh Government will be working closely with stakeholders to review the framework and ensure this can continue being an effective strategic platform for managing our MPA network.

Further, I am committed to delivering our MPA network completion programme and I will shortly be setting out my ambitions for the MCZ designation process. Work has progressed significantly to prepare pre-consultation documentation which will support a stakeholder engagement exercise. I would welcome your views once launched and in the forthcoming consultation due to launch in 2023.

Financial Implications – None

Recommendation 13

The Committee recommends that

The Welsh Government should explain the lack of progress on the designation of MPAs and MCZs and set out a timetable for designation.

Response: Accept

I acknowledge the delay in delivering this work area which had been impacted by staff redeployment to support our Covid-19 and EU Exit response. However, significant progress has been made to develop all the pre-consultation documents which will enable Welsh Government to launch an engagement exercise with stakeholders. We expect this next phase of work to be launched in the coming months, in collaboration with the Marine Conservation Zone Task and Finish Group.

Financial Implications – None

Recommendation 14

The Committee recommends that

The Welsh Government should set out how the new approach NRW has developed for site condition assessments will be funded.

Response: Accept

I recognise the important role MPA condition assessments have informing our MPA management programme and ensuring achievement of favourable status for our protected features.

Welsh Government are exploring the Nature Networks Programme as a potential option for funding feature condition assessments for the Welsh MPA network. Other additional avenues for funding are continuing to be explored.

Financial Implications – None

Recommendation 15

The Committee recommends that

The Welsh Government should set out the latest discussions it has held about the implementation of risk-based marine monitoring programmes across the MPA network, as set out in the MPA 2020-21 Action Plan.

Response: Accept

Welsh Government remain committed to a UK wide monitoring programme based on the identified monitoring options to support the whole MPA network. Welsh Government are continuing discussions with the UK and Devolved Governments in how to deliver this.

Financial Implications – None

Recommendation 16

The Committee recommends that

The Welsh Government should set out its latest plans for the designation of highly protected marine areas.

Response: Accept

Following on from the MPA network completion programme, it is important we take the opportunity to revisit our sites and their successes. We aim to assess our network and

whether the benefits, such as enhanced ecosystem resilience, and protections we seek are being realised. Welsh Government will undertake a holistic stocktake and revisit the levels of protection afforded to our sites and whether current management is proportionate and effective. The need, and appropriateness, for areas of higher protection should be considered as part of this process.

Financial Implications – None

Recommendation 17

The Committee recommends that

The Welsh Government should set out the purpose and timeline for the public consultation on dredging and bottom trawling in Welsh MPAs.

Response: Accept

The Welsh Government continues to work with Natural Resources Wales to undertake a structured evaluation of potential fishing gear interactions with features of Welsh Marine Protected Areas (MPAs) referred to as the Assessing Welsh Fishing Activities project. It is expected the last of the towed gear assessments will be completed in summer 2022, after which it is anticipated proposals for any necessary management measures will form part of a public consultation. The timescale for any consultation will be determined alongside other Welsh Government priorities at the time.

Financial Implications – None

Recommendation 18

The Committee recommends that

The Welsh Government should set out how it can support further blue carbon sequestration projects in Welsh waters.

Response: Accept

I recognise the important role blue carbon can potentially play in our journey to net zero. As one of the key benefits of resilient marine ecosystems, we will encourage the maintenance and enhancement of these habitats through our interventions, including the MPA Management Framework, the Nature Networks Programme, and the wider Programme for Government commitment for marine and coastal habitat restoration.

Financial Implications – None

Recommendation 19

The Committee recommends that

The Welsh Government should provide an update on the progress of the UK Blue Carbon Evidence Partnership. It should also provide further information on plans for a working group in relation to blue carbon in Wales.

Response: Accept

The UK Blue Carbon Evidence Partnership (UKBCEP) is close to establishment with the first meeting to be held in May.

The UKBCEP will facilitate co-ordination and collaboration across UK administrations and progress the evidence base on blue carbon habitats in the UK by addressing key research questions related to blue carbon policy. Year one tasks include mapping evidence needs against relevant policy needs, reflecting the differing policies in each Administration. This will highlight priority areas for further research and influence and inform research activities in Wales.

We are considering the establishment of a specific Welsh group, and are monitoring progress of both the NGO led UK Blue Carbon Forum and the UKBCEP to ensure we are clear on our ambitions for such a group.

Financial Implications – None

Recommendation 20

The Committee recommends that

The Welsh Government should set out its position on the development of a National Blue Carbon Recovery Plan for Wales. If it believes that progress in this policy area can be achieved in a better way, it should set out what that is.

Response: Accept in principle

Net Zero Wales sets out a proposal for developing our blue carbon policy area.

Protecting blue carbon habitats will require us to take an approach informed by robust evidence. We are working with NRW and the UK Blue Carbon Evidence Partnership to develop and deliver a shared blue carbon evidence plan, to include the impacts of human activity and climate change itself on blue carbon habitats and emissions.

Informed by this evidence, we will take action wherever necessary to protect blue carbon habitats spatially and by activity. The production of a blue carbon recovery plan could be considered at a later stage once the evidence base is further established.

Financial Implications – None

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