



Aim

The Marine Management Organisation (MMO) has a responsibility for monitoring marine plans under Section 61 of the Marine and Coastal Access Act 2009. To help understand the effect of the marine plan, and the effectiveness of marine plan policies in securing the objectives of marine plans, regular surveys are conducted. The survey responses are used to inform the three-yearly reports to Parliament, which fulfils the monitoring requirement.

Introduction and methodology

Surveys were run between 9th May to 30th June 2023 for the North East, North West, East, South, South East, and South West Marine Plans. The surveys had some minor amendments from previous years to introduce new questions where there were monitoring gaps, and to streamline the surveys.

The surveys were followed by focus groups with selected stakeholders throughout August 2023. Focus groups addressed themes brought up in surveys and sought further insight on plan use and plan effects.

A similar format and communications plan was followed to the 2022 surveys. Surveys were promoted through direct email to our stakeholder contact list, social media posts, the marine planning newsletter, the Communications and Management for Sustainability newsletter, coastal planner stakeholder engagement, and email signatures throughout the organisation.

Results

Across all marine plan areas, 143 responses to the survey were received. Of these responses, 39% were from decision-making authorities, which is a 10% increase from 2022. Applicants made up 15% of respondents, with 19% indicating they were advisory bodies, and 18% responding as another stakeholder type. Respondents could select multiple roles in which they were responding to the survey, e.g., both decision-maker and applicant. Respondents did not have to answer every question and some questions were only shown based on answers to previous questions.

There was a small overall increase of 6% in the number of responses from 2022 surveys. In both 2022 and 2023 surveys were conducted in all marine plan areas, and the same communications plan was followed. Most survey respondents found out about the survey via direct email, with other communications such as meetings with MMO coastal planners, internal emails and social media making up small numbers of respondents.

Responses generally indicated that decision-makers and applicants used the marine plans, with most respondents using the marine plans in authorisation and enforcement decisions in some cases (35%), in the majority of cases (18%) and in all cases (14%) across all marine plan areas. Most respondents also reported using marine plans in other decisions in some cases (35%), in all cases (13%) and in the majority of cases (8%).

Across the North East, North West, South East and South West Marine Plan surveys, biodiversity and heritage policies were used most frequently by respondents in their decision-making. The most frequently cited as not being used by respondents in decision-making were aggregates, and oil and gas policies. Respondents reported using South Marine Plan biodiversity, heritage, and employment policies most frequently, and not using aggregates, cables, oil and gas, and underwater noise policies frequently in decision-making. Respondents reported using East Marine



Plan aquaculture, biodiversity, climate change and economic policies most frequently, and aggregates and tidal energy policies were used the least in their decision-making.

Focus groups were held with 50 stakeholders across all marine plan areas, including two national sessions, with attendance at each session ranging from two to nine participants.

Participants in the focus groups reported some use of marine plans in their work, and similarly to the survey respondents, most did not specify policies they used, although biodiversity and climate change policies were most frequently cited by stakeholders across sectors represented at the sessions. Participants highlighted the different application of the plans in each of the marine plan areas, with more use of environmental policies discussed with stakeholders in the south west marine plan area. In contrast disturbance was not discussed to as great an extent in the south east marine plan area focus group as participants suggested the area was already busy with higher levels of disturbance making it difficult to perceive potential cumulative effects. Discussions in the east marine plan area focus group centred on energy infrastructure, whereas the north east marine plan area group discussed competing interests in the area. In the north west marine plan area a key discussion was around cross-border cooperation, particularly with terrestrial planning regimes. Participants in the south marine plan area discussed coastal erosion, and water quality specifically sewage discharges and their impact. The national focus groups noted the need for increased awareness and use of the marine plans, and Explore Marine Plans, particularly by terrestrial planning authorities. The national focus groups also noted an increase in proposals for aquaculture developments and using nature-based solutions. Across focus groups it was noted that often individuals are aware of and use the marine plans, but not all relevant teams across an organisation are.

Conclusions and recommendations

Detailed analysis of the survey and focus group data will feed into reporting on the marine plans to understand plan use and policy effects.

The survey response rate was similar to previous years, with some variation in specific plan areas or with types of stakeholders providing responses. Based on previous feedback and feedback from focus groups, the time of year the surveys are run does not seem to have a notable impact on response rates in any given year.

Overall the marine plans continue to be used by a range of stakeholders in both decision-making and in supporting development or submissions of proposals. Some plan and policy effects have been observed but, as noted by respondents, it is difficult for respondents to determine if this is as a direct result of the marine plans.

MMO comments

Thank you to all stakeholders who responded to the surveys and participated in the focus groups. The full results will be used to inform future reports on the marine plans, with the second three-year report on the South Marine Plan due by July 2024 and the first three-year reports for the North East, North West, South East and South West Marine Plans due by June 2024. Findings for the East Marine Plan will be feeding into future plan development.

Further information

Please direct any questions to the Marine Planning Team (planning@marinemanagement.org.uk).