



Department
for Environment,
Food & Rural Affairs

Three-year report on the North West Inshore and North West Offshore Marine Plan

For the period 23 June 2021 to 22 June 2024

Presented to Parliament pursuant to Sections 54 and
61 of the Marine and Coastal Access Act 2009

June 2025

We are the Department for Environment, Food and Rural Affairs. We are responsible for improving and protecting the environment, growing the green economy, sustaining thriving rural communities and supporting our world-class food, farming and fishing industries.

We work closely with our 33 agencies and arm's length bodies on our ambition to make our air purer, our water cleaner, our land greener and our food more sustainable. Our mission is to restore and enhance the environment for the next generation, and to leave the environment in a better state than we found it.



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Background and purpose

Marine plans are an important way to help achieve the government's long-term vision and policies for the marine area. Marine plans aim to provide greater certainty for developers while safeguarding the environment and supporting more informed and efficient decision-making. Marine plans do so by making sure that the right activities happen in the right place, at the right time, and in the right way.

There are 6 marine plans covering 11 marine plan areas for England. The [North West Inshore and North West Offshore Marine Plan](#) ('the Plan') was adopted on 23 June 2021 by the Secretary of State for Environment, Food and Rural Affairs on behalf of the government.

The north west inshore marine plan area stretches from the Solway Firth border with Scotland to the River Dee border with Wales, taking in a total of approximately 4,900 square kilometres of sea. The area overlaps with 19 local authorities, 3 United Nations Educational, Scientific and Cultural Organisation world heritage sites: Frontiers of the Roman Empire (Hadrian's Wall), Liverpool Maritime Mercantile City, and the Lake District, which is also designated as a National Park. The area includes the St Bees Head Heritage Coast and 2 coastal National Landscapes: the Solway Coast, and Arnside and Silverdale.

The north west offshore marine plan area includes the area from 12 nautical miles extending out to the maritime borders with Scotland, Wales and the Isle of Man, a total of approximately 2,200 square kilometres of sea.

The Plan helps to deliver the government's vision and high level marine objectives (HLMOs) set out in the [UK Marine Policy Statement](#). The 13 plan objectives are made up of the HMLOs and are supported by 57 plan policies.

Sections 54 and 61 of the [Marine and Coastal Access Act 2009](#) (MCAA) require matters that may impact the contextual landscape of marine planning and the marine plans themselves to be kept under review, with reports to be published every 3 years following their adoption. This is the first Three-year report on the North West Inshore and North West Offshore Marine Plan.

Method

Although the reporting period is from June 2021 to June 2024, the monitoring period used data collected from June 2021 to June 2023. The [Marine Management Organisation \(MMO\)'s approach to monitoring plans](#) covers:

- context monitoring – an assessment of the legislative or regulatory changes that may affect the relevance of the Plan

- process monitoring – an assessment of if, and how, the Plan and its policies are being used
- outcome monitoring – an assessment of the effects and effectiveness of the plan policies, of the progress made towards securing the plan objectives, and where relevant, of the contribution towards HLMOs

The Plan was reviewed in the context of international, European and national legislation, plans, policies, strategies, statements, agreements and frameworks, which have come into effect since the Plan was adopted in June 2021. Examples include the [Net Zero Strategy: Build Back Greener](#) and the [Joint Fisheries Statement](#). The [Winsor Review](#), which recommends producing a Strategic Spatial Energy Plan, was not included, as it was published after context monitoring was complete. Changes and amendments made to frameworks that existed pre-adoption were taken into consideration, such as the [Environmental Improvement Plan](#) which was published in 2023 as the first revision of [A Green Future: Our 25 Year Plan to Improve the Environment](#).

Context monitoring also reviewed sub-national statutory and non-statutory plans and strategies within and adjacent to the north west marine plan areas, evaluating the Plan's key themes and considerations. Sub-national plans included local plans, core strategies, and local waste and mineral plans. MMO marine licences were analysed to understand the ways that the north west marine plan areas are being used.

Process monitoring assessed:

- the MMO's delivery of training on using the Plan and engagement of stakeholders through digital channels
- the understanding of the Plan by users
- the degree to which the Plan is considered as part of the marine licence determination process

Process monitoring contributes towards understanding the level of plan policy use and knowledge. Knowing the extent to which stakeholders have used the plan policies helps to attribute observed effects to the Plan, and therefore to determine the effectiveness of the policies in securing the plan objectives.

Outcome monitoring used indicators to monitor intended plan policy effects and the Plan as a whole. Indicators used qualitative and quantitative data from sources such as ongoing monitoring programmes, internal MMO systems, surveys, interviews and focus groups. Indicator targets were aligned with the aims of plan policies, enabling progress towards policies to be assessed. The effects of plan policies were used to inform the assessment of progress made towards the plan objectives and the HLMOs. Progress was classed as either positive, neutral, negative or inconclusive.

Main findings

Context monitoring

Context monitoring identified that the [Environment Act 2021](#) and the [British Energy Security Strategy](#) should be reflected in the supporting text of the relevant plan policies. The Environment Act 2021 introduces spatially defined areas for local nature recovery overlapping with the north west inshore marine plan area. The British Energy Security Strategy states the government's long-term vision for energy development and security, outlining a roadmap to meet net zero targets. Amended legislation, plans and frameworks that should be inserted into the Plan's supporting text are the [Environmental Improvement Plan](#), the [National Planning Policy Framework](#) and the [Renewable Transport Fuel Obligations Order 2007](#).

Of the 46 sub-national plans and strategies that were reviewed, 10 had been adopted or reached pre-submission draft stage in the monitoring period. Twelve (27%) sub-national plans cited the Plan, 10 (22%) cited the UK Marine Policy Statement and 14 (31%) cited MCAA. The Cheshire West Local Plan and the Fylde District Council Core Strategy referred to all 3 marine planning documents. Highly considered themes in the sub-national plans and strategies of the north west marine plan areas included coastal change and flooding, tourism and recreation, and economic, social and environmental considerations.

The main uses of the north west marine plan areas have not changed since adoption, and the Plan remains aligned with bordering international marine plans, such as the Welsh National Marine Plan and the National Marine Plan for Scotland. The National Marine Plan for Scotland was published in 2015 and is currently in the process of being replaced.

In 2021, the adoption of the Plan, along with the North East, South East, and South West Marine Plans, marked the completion of first-generation marine plan development in English waters. Since 2021, the Department for Environment, Food and Rural Affairs, supported by the MMO, has been working on the Marine Spatial Prioritisation Programme to understand how the second generation of marine plans can best meet the changing and increasing uses of England's marine area. The process to replace the East Marine Plan began in 2023, following 2 recommendations made to the Secretary of State for the Environment, Food and Rural Affairs.

Despite contextual developments such as the publication of the Environment Act 2021 and the British Energy Security Strategy, the Plan remains broadly aligned with new and existing legislation, sub-national policy, and wider context changes.

Process monitoring

Since the adoption of the Plan, plan use training delivered to external decision-makers, such as Local Authorities, Natural England and Inshore Fisheries Conservation Authorities has shifted to online engagement due to the constraints of the COVID-19 pandemic. Online plan use training has resulted in a wider audience being reached in fewer sessions. In 2020, plan use training in England was delivered to 113 organisations, whereas in 2021 and 2022, plan use training was delivered to 175 and 197 organisations, respectively. Feedback from training sessions, and an evidence project designed to identify opportunities and enhance the effectiveness of marine plan use engagement, found that decision-maker knowledge was improving and that decision-makers across England had begun to implement marine plans into their internal processes.

An evidence project evaluating marine plan use in MMO decision-making found that all evaluated decision-making processes, including marine licensing and marine conservation management, incorporated marine plan assessments. Recommendations included further increasing marine plan guidance and engagement across decision-makers.

Process monitoring also compared webpage user metrics for [Explore Marine Plans](#) (EMP) and relevant marine planning documents over time. Across all English marine plan areas, EMP page views increased by 26% from 2020 to 2021 followed by a decrease of 22% in 2022. During the monitoring period, indicators showed that the [North West Marine Plan webpage](#), the [Using Marine Plans landing page](#) and the [marine planning training videos](#) were visited less frequently, but the [Planning and Development landing page](#) experienced an increase in page views. The observed trend aligns with changes in stakeholder engagement during the adoption of the North East, North West, South East and South West Marine Plans in 2021.

The evaluation of marine licence applications showed that proposals varied in their compliance with plan policies over the monitoring period. In May 2022, improvements outlined in the [Marine Developments blog post](#) were made to the Marine Case Management System (MCMS). Data from before the enhancement of MCMS found that 15 out of 23 (65%) marine licence proposals were returned to the proponent for more information before being approved, whereas afterwards the proportion decreased to 0 out of 8 (0%) marine licence proposals. Improvements to MCMS have aided plan use and the MMO is currently delivering a marine licensing optimisation project which will provide proponents and decision-makers with improved marine planning guidance and training.

Marine licencing assessments from MCMS were analysed to calculate the proportion of marine licencing determinations made by the MMO in the north west marine plan areas that evidenced consideration of the plan policies. Results showed that 31 out of 31 (100%) marine licence determinations considered the Plan in their authorisation decisions, fulfilling the MMO's statutory obligations under section 58(1) of MCAA.

External plan use training has increased across the north west marine plan areas, and the Plan is becoming an influential part of the planning and consenting process. Improvements to MCMS are ongoing and the Marine Planning Team is continuing to work with MMO colleagues and external stakeholders to ensure that the Plan is being used appropriately in authorisation and enforcement decisions.

Outcome monitoring

The Plan was used in internal and external decision-making processes. As a result, the Plan influenced positive policy effects. For example, one of the dredge and disposal policies safeguards licensed disposal sites, reducing the need to designate new disposal sites, and so decreasing environmental impacts. The number of licensed marine activities within, or adjacent to, licensed disposal sites which demonstrated adherence to the mitigation hierarchy, increased from 7 out of 12 (58%) during the baseline period (June 2017 to June 2021) to 7 out of 7 (100%) during the monitoring period. The policy is having its intended effects and contributes to the HLMOs achieving a sustainable marine economy.

Other examples of positive policy effects that the Plan has influenced include:

- supporting the provision of coastal restoration, realignment or conservation through the decision-making process – by ensuring that proposals within the north west inshore marine plan area that are related to restoration, realignment or conservation, or that overlap with important coastal habitats, demonstrate avoidance, minimisation, mitigation or compensation of net habitat loss
- promoting coexistence by facilitating the effective use of marine space and minimising conflict – by supporting and encouraging cable burial where possible to meet the needs of the subsea cabling sector while enabling co-existence and ensuring that proposals avoid or reduce negative impacts on other users of the north west marine plan areas
- supporting proposals for the installation of infrastructure to generate offshore renewable energy inside areas of identified potential and subject to relevant assessments – by identifying future leasing rounds and providing a level of certainty for other activities as to where future development may occur
- not exacerbating coastal change and enabling communities to be more resilient and better able to adapt to coastal erosion and flood risk – by improving the consideration of climate change adaptation measures in decision-making processes

Although the Plan has contributed some progress towards the HLMOs with 28% of plan policies having positive effects, 49% of the policies within the Plan yielded inconclusive results. For example, the access, cross border cooperation and one of the fisheries plan policies were inconclusive due to there being a small sample size of cases to assess. Clear trends are unlikely to be detected until more time has passed since the adoption of the Plan and more relevant marine licence applications are determined.

Two out of 57 policies (4%) within the Plan made neutral progress towards the HLMOs. For example, the Plan contains a renewables policy which supports proposals that enable the provision of renewable energy technologies and associated supply chains. Over the monitoring period, there has been no increase in renewable energy production in the north west marine plan areas. A time lag exists from when renewable energy projects are planned and consented to their development, meaning that data is unlikely to be available within the first monitoring period and the Plan is unlikely to influence changes within this time.

Outcome monitoring identified 7 out of 57 policies (12%) within the Plan that are not yet having their intended effects. For example, the water quality policy made negative progress as the number of classifications of designated bathing waters declined compared to the baseline period (2015 to 2019). Wider national issues, such as rainfall and sewage discharges, influence the classification of designated bathing waters. Nevertheless, monitoring did not show evidence of intended water quality policy effects.

The remaining 3 out of 57 policies (5%) have known monitoring gaps, where indicators have not been developed due to data availability and timeliness. Case studies were collected to provide a proxy for understanding overall progress towards one of the climate change policies, one of the ports, harbours and shipping policies and one of the underwater noise policies, and their contribution to relevant objectives. The MMO is continuously seeking to develop and refine indicators to improve monitoring and fill gaps.

The effects of all relevant contributing policies were used to inform the assessment of overall progress made towards the HLMOs. The Plan has demonstrated some progress towards all the HLMOs, including promoting good governance and using sound science responsibly. In the north west marine plan areas, the highest proportion of positive progress was shown towards the HLMO of living within environmental limits, with higher uncertainty surrounding ensuring a strong, healthy and just society and achieving a sustainable marine economy. Due to the short amount of time that has passed since the Plan was adopted in June 2021, many of the policies' findings were inconclusive.

Conclusions and next steps

There have been legislative, policy and regulatory changes since the adoption of the Plan, such as the introduction of the Environment Act 2021 and the British Energy Security Strategy. However, the changes only have implications for the supporting text of the Plan rather than policy wording.

The Plan is becoming embedded within the planning and consenting process. Training will continue to be provided to MMO teams and other decision-makers to ensure that marine plans keep being used in decision-making processes as defined in section 58 of MCAA, and that proponents consider the Plan in the early stages of proposal development.

Although the Plan has shown some positive progress to meeting the HLMOs, a high proportion of outcome monitoring findings are inconclusive. More time is required to be able to identify clear trends and assess the effects and determine the effectiveness of specific policies.

The Marine Spatial Prioritisation Programme may change the contextual landscape of marine planning in England, along with the replacement East Marine Plan, and the outputs from the Strategic Spatial Energy Plan and the Winsor Review. Outputs of the projects are not yet available, and the Winsor Review was published after context monitoring was completed. Therefore, the extent of the context change is yet to be determined.

Based on the conclusions of this report, the MMO recommends that the North West Inshore and North West Offshore Marine Plan be retained and not amended at this time. The Plan remains relevant and broadly aligned with national and local priorities and further time is required to be able to identify clear trends in plan policy effects and effectiveness. However, it is advised that the recommendation is reassessed once the outputs of the Marine Spatial Prioritisation Programme, the replacement East Marine Plan, the Winsor Review, and the Strategic Spatial Energy Plan are published, to determine the extent of the contextual change on the relevance of the Plan.

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