



Department  
for Environment,  
Food & Rural Affairs

# Three-year report on the South East Inshore 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, in support of 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 [South East Inshore 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 south east inshore marine plan area stretches from Felixstowe in Suffolk to west of Dover in Kent, covering approximately 1,400 kilometres of coastline and taking in a total of approximately 3,900 square kilometres of sea. The French marine area, the east marine plan areas and the south inshore marine plan area border the south east inshore marine plan area. The area overlaps with 42 local authorities (including 3 unitary authorities), 4 United Nations Educational, Scientific and Cultural Organisation world heritage sites (Royal Botanic Gardens in Kew, Palace of Westminster, Tower of London, and Maritime Greenwich), and 3 National Landscapes (Dedham Vale, Kent Downs, and Suffolk Coast and Heaths, and the Dover-Folkestone Heritage Coast).

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 HLMOs and are supported by 55 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 South East Inshore 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 marine 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 [Winser 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 south east inshore marine plan area, 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 south east marine plan area is 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 south east 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 71 sub-national plans and strategies that were reviewed, 27 had been adopted or reached pre-submission draft stage in the monitoring period. Twenty-eight (39%) sub-national plans cited the Plan, 19 (27%) cited the UK Marine Policy Statement and 9 (13%) cited MCAA. Highly considered themes in the sub-national plans and strategies of the south east marine plan area included coastal change and flooding, ecology and biodiversity and climate change. Bexley Local Plan, Dover District Local Plan, Greater London Authority Local Plan, Tower Hamlets Local Plan and Wandsworth District Local Plan most comprehensively considered themes similar to those in the South East Inshore Marine Plan, and approached them in a way that aligned with the intent of the Plan.

The main uses of the south east inshore marine plan area have not changed since adoption, and the Plan remains aligned with bordering international marine plans, such as the French National Strategy for the Sea and Coast and the French Eastern Channel to North Sea Strategic Document on the Seafront.

In 2021, the adoption of the Plan, along with the North West, North 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. The south east inshore marine plan area is adjacent to the east marine plan areas. Currently, the Plan has been assessed as compatible with the East Marine Plans, and any inconsistencies will be reassessed during the drafting of the replacement East Marine Plan.

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 [Using Marine Plans landing page](#) and the [marine planning training videos](#) were visited less frequently, but the [South East Marine Plan webpage](#) and [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 the 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 54 out of 71 (76%) marine licence proposals were returned to the proponent for more information before being approved, whereas afterwards the proportion decreased to 1 out of 12 (8%) 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 determinations made by the MMO in the south east inshore marine plan area that

evidenced consideration of the plan policies. Results showed that 83 out of 83 (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 south east inshore marine plan area, 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 invasive species policies aims to avoid or minimise damage to the marine area from the introduction or transport of invasive non-native species. During the monitoring period, the numbers of invasive species remained stable and there were no new reports of Chinese mitten crabs, a principal invasive species in the south east marine plan area. The policy is having its intended effect and contributes to the HLMOs ensuring a healthy strong and just society and living within environmental limits.

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

- managing the impact to areas of high potential aggregate resource – by ensuring that marine activities avoid, minimise or mitigate significant adverse impacts on aggregate extraction
- supporting biodiversity gain and ecosystem function through the decision-making process – by encouraging and supporting proposals that conserve, enhance or restore coastal habitats and by requiring proposals to manage net habitat loss because of coastal squeeze
- enhancing cross-border co-operation between the terrestrial and marine planning systems – by requiring proposals to consider cross-border impacts throughout the lifetime of the proposed activity
- ensuring that current port and harbour activity and future growth is not restricted, and long-term strategic decisions are enabled – by restricting proposals that may have a significant adverse impact on future opportunity for sustainable expansion of port and harbour activities

Although the Plan has contributed some progress towards the HLMOs with 27% of plan policies having positive effects, 45% of policies within the Plan yielded inconclusive results. For example, an aggregates policy, a biodiversity policy and a dredging and disposal policy 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.

One out of 55 policies (2%) within the Plan made neutral progress towards the HLMOs. One renewables policy supports proposals that enable the provision of renewable energy technologies and associated supply chains. Over the monitoring period, there was no increase in renewable energy production in the south east inshore marine plan area. A time lag exists from when renewable energy projects are planned and consented to their development. Therefore, data is unlikely to be available within the first monitoring period and the Plan is unlikely to influence changes in this time.

Outcome monitoring identified 10 out of 55 policies (18%) within the Plan that are not yet having their intended effects. For example, over the monitoring period, marine litter items at amenity beaches in the south east inshore marine plan area did not decrease. Additionally, the number of local plans and strategies that considered one of the marine litter policies did not increase. For the 2 marine litter policies, monitoring did not show evidence of intended policy effects.

The remaining 3 out of 55 policies (5%) have known monitoring gaps, where indicators have not yet 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 the HLMOs, including promoting good governance and using sound science responsibly. In the south east inshore marine plan area, 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. There was some progress shown towards achieving a sustainable marine economy. Many contributing policies showed inconclusive progress towards their aims due to the short amount of time that has passed since the Plan was adopted in June 2021.

## 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 South East Inshore 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 context change on the relevance of the Plan.





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