



Department  
for Environment,  
Food & Rural Affairs

# Three-year report on the South Inshore and South Offshore Marine Plan

For the period 17 July 2021 to 16 July 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 Inshore and South Offshore Marine Plan](#) ('the Plan') was adopted on 17 July 2018 by the Secretary of State for Environment, Food and Rural Affairs on behalf of the government.

The south marine plan areas cover approximately 20,000 square kilometres of inshore and offshore waters across 1,000 kilometres of coastline stretching from Folkstone in Kent to the river Dart in Devon.

The south marine plan areas include one of the busiest shipping channels in the world, are host to almost two thirds of Royal Navy ships at Portsmouth and contain 63 Ministry of Defence danger and exercise areas. The south marine plan areas overlap with a United Nations Educational, Scientific and Cultural Organization world heritage site and 31 Marine Conservation Zones, one of which is the offshore Highly Protected Marine Area Dolphin Head.

The Plan helps to deliver the government's vision and high level marine objectives (HLMOs) set out in the [UK Marine Policy Statement](#). There are 12 South Marine Plan objectives, and these are supported by 53 plan policies.

Section 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 second Three-year report on the South Inshore and South Offshore Marine Plan. The first Three-year report on the South Inshore and South Offshore Marine Plan was published in 2021.

## 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 most recent 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 first Three-year report. 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. Frameworks amended over the monitoring period 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 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 also analysed to understand the ways that the south 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. 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.

Over the monitoring period, indicators continued to be developed. The number increased from 21 indicators with 82 sub-indicators in 2020 to 35 indicators with 171 sub-indicators in 2023. Existing indicators were also refined to improve the ability to monitor the use of the Plan and its effects more accurately. The adoption of new indicators and increased use of external data has provided a more comprehensive monitoring approach when compared to the first Three-year report.

# 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 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 9 sub-national plans and strategies that were reviewed, all had been adopted or reached pre-submission draft stage in the monitoring period. Three (33%) sub-national plans cited the Plan, 4 (44%) cited the UK Marine Policy Statement and 5 (56%) cited MCAA. The Eastleigh Local Plan and the Kent Minerals and Waste Local Plan referred to all 3 marine planning documents. Highly considered themes in the sub-national plans and strategies of the south marine plan areas included ecology and biodiversity, coastal change and flooding and tourism and recreation.

The main uses of the south marine plan areas have not changed since the publication of the first Three-year report, 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.

Further policy changes since the publication of the first Three-year report, include the adoption of the North East, North West, South East and South West Marine Plans, marking 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 publication of the first Three-year report, 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. Indicators showed that the [South Marine Plan webpage](#), the [Using Marine Plans landing page](#) and the [marine planning training videos](#) were visited less frequently since the publication of the first Three-year report. However, the [Planning and Development landing page](#) experienced an increase in page views during the monitoring period. 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 77 out of 102 (75%) marine licence proposals were returned to the proponent for more information before being approved, whereas afterwards the proportion decreased to 3 out of 39 (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 licensing assessments from MCMS were analysed to calculate the proportion of marine licensing determination made by the MMO in the south marine plan areas that evidenced consideration of the plan policies. Results showed that 141 out of 141 (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 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, the herring fisheries policy ensures that proposals mitigate any potential impacts to important herring spawning zones from 1 November to the last day of February, annually. In the baseline period (2014 to 2018) and first monitoring period (2018 to 2021), 16% and 72% of proposals considered mitigation in herring spawning areas, respectively. In this monitoring period, 100% of proposals demonstrated mitigation consideration. The herring policy is having its intended effect and contributes to Objective 12: Space for Nature in the Plan, and the HLMO of achieving a sustainable marine economy by facilitating effective co-existence of marine development with the herring fishery.

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

- encouraging the conservation objectives of marine protected areas (MPAs) and the ecological coherence of the marine protected network – by supporting proposals, within or adjacent to MPAs, that demonstrate the mitigation hierarchy by avoiding, minimising or mitigating adverse impacts
- protecting aggregate licence areas in the south marine plan areas – by ensuring that other activities and developments are compatible with aggregate extraction
- safeguarding International Maritime Organisation (IMO) routing systems that are essential for shipping activity freedom of navigation and navigational safety – by ensuring that proposals which require static sea surface infrastructure, or that significantly reduce under-keel clearance, are not authorised within IMO routing systems
- enabling the continuation of existing production and sustainable expansion of aquaculture – by requiring other industries to demonstrate their compatibility with the sector and increasing the total number of licensed sustainable aquaculture activities within identified areas of potential production

Although the Plan has contributed some progress towards the plan objectives with 43% of plan policies having positive effects, 28% of the policies within the Plan yielded inconclusive results. For example, 3 fishing policies, one aggregates policy, and 2 water quality policies were inconclusive due to there being a small sample size of cases to assess. The Plan has a 20-year lifetime, meaning that it is expected, even after 2 monitoring periods, that some policies require further time to produce decisive results.

One out of 53 policies (2%) within the Plan made neutral progress towards the plan objectives. A renewables policy supports proposals that enable the development of supply chains associated with the deployment of renewable energy. Over the monitoring period, there has been no increase in renewable energy production in the south marine plan areas. A time lag exists from when renewable energy projects are planned and consented to their development. Therefore, it is reasonable that data is unavailable within the second monitoring period.

Outcome monitoring identified 10 out of 53 policies (19%) within the Plan that are not yet having their intended effects. For example, the 2 employment plan policies made negative progress. Over the monitoring period, the number of marine-related employment opportunities in the south marine plan areas declined, which was expected due to the impacts of the COVID-19 pandemic: staff being furloughed and made redundant.

The remaining 4 out of 53 policies (8%) 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 the disturbance policy, one of the climate change policies, one of the marine protected area 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.

Overall, 5 plan objectives recorded positive progress, 6 plan objectives showed inconclusive progress and one plan objective (Objective 4) demonstrated negative progress. Objective 4 supports marine activities that increase or enhance employment opportunities at all skills levels among the workforce of coastal communities, particularly where they support existing or developing industries within the south marine plan areas. The 2 employment plan policies with negative effects are the only policies that directly contribute to achieving Objective 4. The impact of the restrictions of the COVID-19 pandemic has likely influenced the negative progress of Objective 4.

The first Three-year report found that progress was made towards 11 out of 12 plan objectives. However, increasing the number of indicators over the monitoring period has led to a wider range of results and an increase in plan objective progress being inconclusive. More time is required to determine the effect of inconclusive policies and their progress towards plan objectives.

The effects of all relevant contributing policies were used to inform the assessment of overall progress made towards the HLMOs. The monitoring changes resulted in more mixed progress towards the HLMOs being observed than in the first Three-year report. Some positive progress has been made towards the HLMOs: achieving a sustainable marine economy, ensuring a strong, healthy, and just society, and living within environmental limits, but also promoting good governance and using sound science responsibly.



## Conclusions and next steps

There have been legislative, policy and regulatory changes since the publication of the first Three-year report, 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 continues to be 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.

The largest proportion of plan policies reported positive effects, resulting in the Plan showing positive progress towards 5 plan objectives. Furthermore, some progress has been made towards the HLMOs. After 2 monitoring periods, the Plan has demonstrated its ongoing utility for sustainable development at sea. Notable numbers of policies and objectives recorded inconclusive progress, requiring more time to be able to identify clear trends in the effects and effectiveness of some plan 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 Winser Review. Outputs of the projects are not yet available, and the Winser 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 Inshore and South Offshore Marine Plan be retained and not amended at this time. The Plan remains relevant and broadly aligned with national and local priorities and has made some positive progress towards plan objectives and the HLMOs. Inconclusive policies and plan objectives are expected in the context of the Plan's 20-year lifespan and do not reflect a need to recommend a replacement. However, it is advised that the recommendation is reassessed once the outputs of the Marine Spatial Prioritisation Programme, the replacement East Marine Plan, the Winser 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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