

Briefing by the Marine Conservation Society

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# Marine Spatial Planning

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**The Marine Conservation Society is calling on the Welsh Government and political parties to:**

- ✔ Use the Spatial Assessment of Welsh Seas to decide how different areas of Welsh seas should be utilised
- ✔ Ensure Welsh Government funding supports nature recovery by using the Sustainable Investment Principles, and work with the Marine Conservation Society and the Crown Estate regarding 'nature leasing' areas of the seabed
- ✔ Ensure that new compensation measures developing under the Marine Recovery Fund deliver for nature
- ✔ Deliver an ecologically coherent and well-managed network by 2030

## Why do we need holistic marine spatial planning?

Marine spatial planning aims to balance the needs of various sea users with the requirement to protect and enhance the marine environment, whilst delivering on societal needs and goals. It is a consultative process that represents an integrated approach to planning at sea.

Although crucial to enable a transition to Net Zero, the rapid rollout of offshore renewables is adding another pressure onto already-struggling marine ecosystems. More spatial, strategic and holistic marine planning can direct activities to the **least environmentally sensitive areas**, providing space and certainty for all sectors to operate whilst protecting and enhancing the marine environment.

## Spatial Assessment of Welsh Seas

Following the independent review of marine planning, we welcomed the announcement of a Spatial Assessment of Welsh Seas, complementing the Crown Estate's Whole of the Seabed mapping. We hope this will provide valuable information on how Welsh seas are, and could be, used.

However, it is crucial that the next Welsh Government considers and acts on the scenarios proposed. As noted in the independent review, 'in the absence of appropriate foresight and planning, marine developments may exceed the environmental capacity of Welsh marine areas, risking overuse by certain sectors.' It is possible to deliver for nature, climate, people and the economy together, but key decisions must be taken now for Wales' future.

## Nature leasing

Using the Crown Estate's ability to lease areas of the seabed for activities, nature leasing utilises these areas for nature rather than development. These would work as 'Other Effective Conservation Measures' (OECMs) and can be a crucial tool in achieving marine conservation targets. As Marine Protected Areas (MPAs) must contain certain species or habitats to be protected under current feature-based legislation, OECMs can protect areas of significant ecological importance which would not meet MPA criteria, for example blue carbon hotspots or fish spawning grounds.

The Welsh Government and the Crown Estate should collaborate to introduce these long-term nature leases and identify appropriate areas using existing datasets such as the Crown Estate's Whole of the Seabed work and blue carbon inventory mapping. Nature leases can complement MPAs in establishing a well-managed and ecologically coherent network.

## Compensation measures for offshore renewables

The UK Government is proposing amending the Habitats Regulations to allow for 'wider' measures that need not restore the exact habitat or species damaged. This applies to Welsh offshore waters and, for large projects, Welsh inshore waters. Whilst we acknowledge the complexities that arise in finding appropriate compensation for offshore wind, these proposals risk weakening MPA protections and delivering inadequate compensation. We urge the Welsh Government to work with the UK Government to tighten up legal safeguards for these proposals to be ecologically effective and maintain the coherence of the network of MPAs.

## As an MS, how can you help?

- Push your political party to include our key policy recommendations in your 2026 Senedd Manifesto
- Urge the Welsh Government to take ownership and to prioritise nature in decisions over how sea space is used
- Champion nature leasing in the Senedd, an opportunity to complement the existing MPA network and align with the Sustainable Investment Principles

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