

## Follow up information to the Climate Change, Environment and Infrastructure Committee following Marine Environmental Management discussion on 9 Dec 2021

### Summary statement from NRW

We value the opportunity to discuss marine environmental management with the Committee and recognise that there have been a number of areas of change since previous committees looked into this area.

It may help to start with a quick re-cap of NRW's role in this area. NRW's general purpose is to pursue the sustainable management of natural resources. This role extends to the marine environment which makes up almost half of the territory of Wales. NRW's role in relation to marine environmental management is wide ranging including, for example: advice, evidence, regulation including marine licensing, monitoring, coastal flood risk/erosion management, incident response, protected site management, cockle fisheries management (Dee and Bury inlet) and the Dee navigation authority.

We are now working in two government-declared emergencies, both a climate and nature emergency. Whilst some of the impacts and opportunities are well documented and publicised on land, they are perhaps less well publicised in relation to the sea, which has much to lose and much to offer. We recognise that the impact of climate change is significant at sea, but that also the sea provides opportunities to mitigate some of the impacts through, for example, absorption of carbon, climate amelioration, and provision of renewable energy. The nature emergency adds imperative to effectively managing the extensive network of marine protected areas which are a key tool to support a resilient marine ecosystem. In NRW we are seeking to bring these concerns together and address both the climate and nature emergency issues and opportunities in an integrated way.

Key programmes of work for us in this respect include: our Offshore Renewable Energy Programme; advice and evidence to support the development of a spatial approach to marine planning; renewing our MPA condition assessments and conservation advice; developing and delivering our restoration and blue carbon programmes; and also delivering monitoring and evidence to improve our understanding and inform planning and management. We hope to be able to discuss some of these areas with you today.

Despite the challenges we are fully committed in NRW to prioritising our efforts through our marine programme – be they advisory, regulatory, direct management etc – to focus on the areas where we can have greatest impact on the sustainable management of the marine environment.

## **Scale of the gap in funds for evidence and where others overcome the restrictions to access multi-year funding**

NRW produces an annual list of high priority marine and coastal evidence needs. This list is prioritised from a 'long list' of recognised evidence needs, across NRW's marine and coastal work. Evidence to inform offshore renewables cases is one of the priority drivers. At present, there are 20 projects on the prioritised list. This reflects NRW's capacity to progress these projects. Some of these evidence gaps can be addressed within the financial year; others however are complex problems requiring multi-year experimental research to enable meaningful progression. NRW are unable to carry this out on our own, so we look to other organisations and funding streams. Our budget for marine and coastal evidence work (not including monitoring) is currently around £160,000 per year. We estimate that to substantially progress all 20 priority projects would cost in the region of £3.5 million per year.

NRW seeks to work with partners to address these evidence needs. For example, we are working with the Crown Estate led Offshore Wind Evidence for Change (OWEC) programme. This is a £25 million multi-year programme comprising a mix of studies, research projects and evidence-gathering to help better understand and overcome the cumulative environmental impacts of offshore wind, and its effects on users of the sea and onshore communities. We are also engaged with the Offshore Wind Enabling Actions Programme (OWEAP), which is a £4.3 million initiative run jointly by Defra and BEIS, funded by HM Treasury. These programmes can be valuable to jointly fill evidence gaps, where the Welsh evidence needs align with those across the UK. However, the focus of these programmes tends to be on existing offshore wind developments in the North Sea which means some impact pathways and receptors (habitats and species) are not always the priority in Wales.

Both the OWEC and OWEAP programmes have an offshore wind focus. In Wales, the energy mix is more diverse with the future development of floating offshore wind, tidal range, tidal stream and wave energy dependent on addressing key evidence gaps specific to those sectors. The Welsh Government and NRW are sponsors of ORJIP Ocean Energy, a UK-wide collaborative programme of environmental research with an annual budget of £55,900 and the aim of reducing consenting risks for wave, tidal stream and tidal range projects. The collection of survey data in the marine environment is extremely expensive and to comprehensively survey the entirety of Welsh waters would cost millions, or possibly billions of pounds.

NRW would welcome a change to the funding mechanism to allow funding allocation over multiple years, to enable the delivery of multi-year evidence projects.

### **Evidence relating to sandeels**

The distribution and abundance of sandeels in Welsh waters is not well studied though RSPB are currently running a project, supported by an NRW grant, to assess the distribution of forage fish species in Welsh waters, including sandeels. The report will cover:

- Spawning and nursery grounds of forage fish in Welsh waters and surroundings.  
Distribution of adult and juvenile forage fish species during autumn and winter

- Pressures on forage fish in Welsh Waters - A literature review of known and potential pressures on forage fish

When published in early 2022 this report will provide useful evidence for sandeel species.

NRW does have sandeel evidence projects in the long-list of evidence gaps identified in our marine and coastal evidence programme, however none are currently in the top priority list for taking forward with available resources.

Sandeels have specific habitat preferences, bury in the seabed at night and during winter, and lay benthic eggs, making them vulnerable to impacts from human activities interacting with the seabed. Sandeels form discrete populations that also making them vulnerable to losses from human activities. Welsh commercial and recreational fisheries for sandeels and Norway pout are limited, though sandeel habitat and populations are subject to other pressures in Welsh waters such as aggregate dredging.

The sandeel is currently a species listed under Section 7 of the Environment (Wales) Act 2016. The Welsh Ministers must take all reasonable steps to maintain and enhance the species included in the list published under Section 7 and encourage others to take such steps.

Sandeels are a source of food for kittiwakes. NRW is currently finalising a report into the current status of the black-legged kittiwake in Welsh waters. We will make this available to the committee as soon as this is published.

### **NRW's role in advising on and consenting marine renewable energy**

*Note of clarification:* In later sessions on the 9<sup>th</sup>, the Committee heard that Marine Scotland utilise a "Deploy and Monitor" policy to facilitate deployment of marine renewable energy technologies. To clarify, the "Survey, Deploy and Monitor" policy facilitated development by reducing the environmental survey effort required to support applications to a minimum of 1 year of environmental survey, in areas considered to be low risk. This policy was based on the environmental sensitivity of the proposed location, the scale of development, and the technology type proposed. The extent of Marine Protected Areas (MPAs) in Wales means that relatively few locations in the inshore region would be identified as low environmental sensitivity, in the absence of large-scale strategic baseline assessment. Please note that this policy has been withdrawn in Scotland and is no longer available on the Marine Scotland web pages.