

Environmental Audit Committee

Governing the marine environment: Government Response

Fourth Special Report of Session 2024–25

HC 1272

Environmental Audit Committee

The Environmental Audit Committee is appointed by the House of Commons to consider to what extent the policies and programmes of government departments and non-departmental public bodies contribute to environmental protection and sustainable development; to audit their performance against such targets as may be set for them by His Majesty's Ministers; and to report thereon to the House.

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Fourth Special Report

The Environmental Audit Committee published its Second Report of Session 2024–25, [Governing the marine environment](#) (HC 551) on 5 June 2025. The Government response was received on 1 August 2025, and is appended below.

Appendix: Government Response

Introduction

The Government thanks the Environmental Audit Committee for their inquiry and subsequent report, *Governing the marine environment*, published on 5 June 2025.

The report makes 16 recommendations covering marine governance and stakeholder engagement, marine planning, marine protection and recovery, and international marine treaties and global marine protection. These responsibilities sit across several Government departments, who have contributed to this response. These include the Department for the Environment, Food and Rural Affairs (Defra), the Department of Energy Security and Net Zero (DESNZ), the Department for Transport (DfT) and the Foreign, Commonwealth and Development Office (FCDO).

The structure of this response corresponds to the order of recommendations given in the Committee’s report. Paragraphs with recommendations are quoted, with recommendations in bold and italics and the Government response underneath.

Marine Governance and Stakeholder Engagement

Domestic marine governance

Recommendation at paragraph 17: Given the lack of coordination, we recommend that one department must act as the lead authority for marine governance and the coordination of marine policy. This department should be responsible for engaging with other departments and bodies, including The Crown Estate, to ensure their needs are considered alongside competing demands. However, ultimate responsibility and accountability for determining how these priorities are balanced should rest with the lead department. This will enable the Government to address and support the diverse ambitions of various sectors while ensuring the protection of marine nature and sustainable use of the marine environment. The Government should confirm the lead department and identify its coordination responsibilities by January 2026.

It is agreed that Government should support the needs of different marine sectors while ensuring the protection of marine nature and sustainable use of the marine environment.

The Department for Environment, Food and Rural Affairs (Defra) is the lead department for marine planning, and marine plans set the policies that are relevant to each region. Departments actively contribute to making sure that each marine plan reflects the latest Government position. Each marine plan is an opportunity to deliver national policies locally. Currently, the East Marine Plan is in the process of being replaced to align with the latest national policy positions.

Defra has also led the cross government Marine Spatial Prioritisation programme (MSPri) to ensure that the sea space is developed in a strategic manner. Through this programme, Defra has engaged the key departments across Whitehall with marine interests, their delivery and advisory bodies, and The Crown Estate (TCE).

It would not be appropriate to have one department making all the balancing and prioritisation decisions about how the marine environment is used. Marine plans should be used to guide decision makers on how to balance different demands of the sea. National policy statements also set out how the environment and other activities should be considered. The need to consider options and impacts on the environment is already set out in the impact assessments and where relevant when the decision goes to the Secretary of State responsible for nationally significant infrastructure

project decisions. It would not, for example, be appropriate for Defra to make the final decision about the balance of priorities—for example when it comes to ports expansion or where telecoms cabling can go.

To support the implementation of an effective systems approach to marine governance, Defra has begun to apply its Systems Research Programme.¹ Defra will publish a report on its foundational work to create a ‘marine systems map’ to support future systems approaches to marine governance by early 2026.

Recognising that ‘institutional sustainability’ is increasingly viewed as a key pillar of sustainable marine governance, Defra has commissioned a soon-to-be-published evidence statement² that will underpin the development of sustainable marine governance. Improvements to the sustainability of institutions can help to address overlapping, and inconsistent governance arrangements. Supporting delivery of the Fisheries Act (2020), but also wider marine governance, the evidence statement sets out the governance considerations required to balance environmental, social, and economic sustainability across the marine system, including when considering climate action and nature recovery.

The Government therefore partially agrees with this recommendation.

Stakeholder engagement

Recommendation at paragraph 23: *Engaging stakeholders in a meaningful way is essential to ensure that decisions are inclusive, transparent, and responsive to both environmental and societal needs. For engagement to be effective, it must occur through appropriate forums, begin early in the decision-making process, and be maintained consistently throughout. Poor stakeholder engagement leads to the risk of the Government taking decisions without a full understanding of the consequences on them. It also contributes to low public awareness and may undermine support for policies that could otherwise deliver significant local and national benefits. While public bodies such as the Marine Management Organisation have taken steps to improve engagement, the Department for Environment, Food and Rural Affairs must ensure that stakeholder engagement is strengthened across all areas of marine policy.*

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1 Defra (2022). Integrating a systems approach into Defra [Available at: <https://www.gov.uk/government/publications/integrating-a-systems-approach-into-defra>]

2 Defra (forthcoming). The Role of Social and Institutional Dimensions within Sustainable Fisheries Governance.

Recommendation at paragraph 24: *We recommend that the Department for Environment, Food and Rural Affairs (DEFRA) develops a comprehensive framework for engaging a diverse range of stakeholders, particularly coastal communities and underrepresented voices, early-on in marine decision-making and outline the responsible organisation for leading the engagement across areas of marine policy. This framework should identify a range of stakeholder engagement activities appropriate to the scale and impact of different decisions (e.g. roundtables, workshops, participatory mapping or advisory councils). The framework should also ensure that adequate resources and expertise are allocated to facilitate effective and inclusive stakeholder engagement, which will also help raise public awareness and understanding. Additionally, the Government should be transparent about decision-making processes and acknowledge the implications of these decisions for stakeholders. DEFRA should publish this framework by January 2026.*

Stakeholder engagement is highly valued by the Department, its Arms-Length Bodies (ALBs) and Ministers. It is a central part of policy delivery and implementation. In tandem, Defra fully recognises the importance of being clear about how and when stakeholders can input and is testing new and novel approaches to further improve.

For example:

- Defra currently undertakes significant engagement with stakeholders in the development and delivery of policy related to the management of the marine environment and uses of English coastal waters. This includes engaging stakeholders across a diverse range of sectors, through multiple forms, and at all stages in the development and implementation of policy.
- Stakeholder engagement is central to developing the marine planning process, which is led in England by the Marine Management Organisation (MMO). This involves significant stakeholder engagement in the development of marine plans – including close partnership with local and national stakeholders from a range of backgrounds and sectors. Stakeholder involvement is central to creating robust, evidence-based local plans.
- Defra has recently engaged stakeholders on the principles and criteria to assess the ecological, social and economic impacts of compensatory Marine Protected Areas (MPAs) for unavoidable impacts of offshore wind.

- Defra has adopted the principles of co-design in a range of other initiatives. These include for example the delivery of sustainable fishing frameworks³ and the development of a new Fishing Industry Social Survey.

The information gathered from robust and well-planned stakeholder engagement is valued and important as demonstrated by our evaluation of the effectiveness of engagement following guidance set out in HM Treasury's Magenta Book. Defra and its ALBs already works within a wide framework of coordinated engagement and commits significant resources and time to ensuring that our discussions with stakeholders effectively contribute to the building of evidence, and development and delivery of policy.

Stakeholders have informally expressed to us that their ability and capacity to engage with us to shape policy can be finite, and minimising the impacts of engagement is something we strive towards. We will review how we can further improve the ways we engage the full range of stakeholders at all levels in both the development of individual policies, and for the delivery of our overall work on the management of the marine environment.

As well as extensive engagement of stakeholders through formal public consultations by Defra, and its ALBs, both Defra and ALBs responsible for marine management also liaise closely to keep each other informed of stakeholder views. This helps to determine which body should lead on engagement. For example, in some circumstances Defra also works more closely with stakeholders, where appropriate, and ahead of formal consultation to co-design policy and delivery, for example through Fisheries Management Plans.

The Government therefore partially agrees with the recommendation at paragraph 23 and disagrees with the recommendation at paragraph 24.

Marine Planning

UK marine planning

Recommendation at paragraph 34: *We urge Ministers to issue a revised Marine Policy Statement no later than January 2026. The updated statement should reflect the current and evolving pressures on the marine environment, clearly outline the Government's priorities for marine usage, and set out by which decisions on the balance between marine exploitation and marine protection will be made.*

3 Defra (2020). Low impact definition co-design [Available at: <https://sciencesearch.defra.gov.uk/ProjectDetails?ProjectID=20408&FromSearch=Y&Publisher=1&SearchText=low%20impact&SortString=ProjectCode&SortOrder=Asc&Paging=10#Description>]

Defra recognises the role that the Marine Policy Statement (MPS) plays in setting a high-level context for marine planning and the development of marine plans. The key documents which guide spatial planning decisions are marine plans, which reflect both national and local policies, and the national policy statements, such as those for energy. Defra is aware of concerns regarding the age of the MPS, which was published in 2011 under a previous Government and includes, for example, support for oil and gas development. However, the current Government's overarching commitment to no new oil and gas licences means that this aspect of the MPS no longer carries any practical effect. Updating the UK MPS would also be very resource intensive for all governments involved and would take much longer than six months.

Instead our resource and effort is deployed to ensuring we take a more strategic approach to marine spatial planning, developing colocation solutions and working with MMO on the replacement of the East Marine Plan.

Plus, as part of the UK's membership to the Leader-led High-Level Panel for a Sustainable Ocean Economy (Ocean Panel), the UK has committed to deliver a Sustainable Ocean Plan (SOP) by 2027. As part of this plan, Government will outline how it will manage its ocean area, advancing long-term economic and social development, while simultaneously promoting the health of marine ecosystems.

In terms of the key pressures on the marine environment, these are already identified in the UK Marine Strategy (UKMS), which is reviewed and is updated every six years.

The Government therefore disagrees with this recommendation to update the UKMPS and that it is possible to do so in 6 months.

Marine spatial planning and prioritisation

Recommendation at paragraph 38: *We ask the Department for Environment, Food and Rural Affairs (DEFRA) to clarify the objectives and planned timeline for outputs from the Marine Spatial Prioritisation Programme and explain how it contributes to the Department's aims for "clean, healthy, safe, productive and biologically diverse oceans and seas". We recommend that the programme sets out a framework for marine spatial planning that is adaptable to future pressures and follows the guidance set out in an updated Marine Policy Statement, which we have also recommended. This framework should direct activity toward areas of least environmental sensitivity, fully integrate the fisheries sector to avoid conflict and support co-location and*

explicitly address the cumulative impacts of multiple marine uses. This will support the sustainable management of marine resources and reduce pressure on ecologically valuable areas.

The MSPri programme supports the goal of achieving “clean, healthy, safe, productive and biologically diverse oceans and seas” and does so through developing a more strategic approach to the use of sea space. Key consideration is given to the needs of different marine sectors and nature recovery.

Defra communicated what the MSPri objectives are at the start of the programme. They were to optimise the use of the sea, maximise colocation and where necessary to prioritise the use of the sea. The programme has evolved since then, including starting to identify ways to improve colocation helping to make a more sustainable use of marine space.

The MSPri process has more recently focused on providing a strategic steer to TCE on key marine interests related to potential future offshore wind development in the English sea. As suggested in the recommendation at paragraph 38, the guidance will help TCE in identifying suitable areas for future offshore wind lease areas which avoid the most environmentally sensitive areas (including birds) or areas which are important for other marine sectors and Government priorities. It will also help to reduce clashes between future offshore wind projects and other users of the sea, including fisheries.

This work has taken place prior to any formal leasing or planning process. It is designed to complement existing processes such as the Nationally Significant Infrastructure Project (NSIP) and marine planning.

The next phase of MSPri will be to take forward the colocation workstream and continue to build on the steer given by Government to TCE. This will include working with TCE after they have conducted their stakeholder engagement over the summer of 2025.

Marine plans of course play a key role in delivering the Government’s long-term vision for the marine environment. They support the sustainable management of marine resources as suggested in recommendation in paragraph 38. They also provide greater certainty for developers and support more informed and efficient decision-making, while ensuring environmental safeguards are in place. Marine plans are regularly reviewed, with updates published every three years following adoption, to ensure they remain relevant and adapt to emerging pressures.

The NSIP process, which governs the consenting of offshore wind farms, considers the impact of the environment through various stages and requirements. This includes Environmental Impact Assessments (EIAs), Habitats Regulations Assessments (HRAs), consultation with Statutory Nature Conservation Bodies (SNCBs) and strategic compensation.

The work underway to reduce pressures on the marine environment, including environmentally sensitive areas, is set out in the UK Marine Strategy programme of measures, published in January 2025.

The Government therefore partially agrees with this recommendation, because as explained previously it does not agree that updating the UK MPS is a priority.

Recommendation at paragraph 41: We call on the Department for Environment, Food and Rural Affairs (DEFRA) to publish an assessment on the impact of changes in marine spatial use on specific sectors. Affected sectors and associated stakeholders should be central to the assessment and planning of the transition.

Defra acknowledges that changes in how the sea is used is having an impact on a range of sectors and on nature. On 20 June 2025 Defra, the Department of Agriculture Environment and Rural Affairs Northern Ireland, the Scottish Government and Welsh Government published a consultation seeking views on the update to the UKMS Part One. The UKMS Part One sets out the latest assessments on the state of UK seas. The assessments look at 11 quality descriptors of the marine environment and give us an indication of the impact the uses of the sea have on including ecosystem health, pollution, human impacts and eutrophication (excessive nutrient enrichment of water).

In addition, many of the pressures faced by UK seas are transboundary and common with those countries the UK shares the seas with. This is why the UK works collaboratively with our neighbours through the Oslo and Paris Convention for the Protection of the North East Atlantic (OSPAR). OSPAR's 2023 Quality Status Report (QSR) considered various sectors impacting the marine environment of the North-East Atlantic; including radioactive substances, offshore oil and gas, renewable energy, climate change, and other human activities.

These assessments provide the scientific knowledge to identify the priority elements for actions to achieve the UK's vision for its seas. The results are used to inform a programme of measures (POMs) to ensure that the use of the marine environment is at a level that is sustainable, thus safeguarding the potential for uses and activities by current and future generations. The latest POMs was published January 2025.

It would not be feasible to carry out an assessment on the impact of changes in marine spatial use on specific sectors. The marine environment is always evolving as is how it is used. The need to consider options and impacts on the environment is already set out in the impact assessments and where relevant when the decision goes to the Secretary of State responsible for nationally significant infrastructure project decisions.

Government, using the Marine Spatial Prioritisation Programme, has developed a more strategic way of considering our use of the seabed by identifying priorities in different locations (in English waters). This is the first time that an exercise like this has been done. Where avoidance of conflicts is not possible, it will provide earlier identification of the trade-offs that might need to eventually be made.

The MSPri programme is working closely with The Crown Estate (TCE) and the National Energy Systems Operator (NESO) in their development of the Strategic Spatial Energy Plan (SSEP). TCE will continue to engage extensively with marine users and other key stakeholders, to gather feedback to be incorporated into TCE's Marine Delivery Routemap – which aims to help plan all marine sectors and nature in an integrated way. Both the Strategic Spatial Energy Plan (SSEP) and the Marine Spatial Prioritisation programme (MSPri) have been, and will be, engaging government departments and other stakeholders to agree data that will be used within their processes, and both are utilising The Crown Estate's (TCE) Marine Delivery Routemap capability to map their resulting outputs.

This recommendation is linked specifically to publishing a plan to secure a just transition for the fishing industry in the face of changing marine space use (recommendation at paragraph 42). The report also recognises that on 19 May 2025, the Government launched a £360 million 'Fishing & Coastal Growth Fund' that aims to support the next generation of fishers and revitalise coastal communities. The details of this are being developed and Government has committed to work with the fishing industry to target investment where it matters most.

The Government therefore partially agrees with this recommendation.

Recommendation at paragraph 42: *The Government should publish a plan to secure a just transition for those affected by changes through targeted support, skills development, identification of long-term opportunities and associated funding. The support should reflect both traditional and emerging marine sectors, to ensure the retention of existing expertise while supporting the adoption of more sustainable practices within those industries. The plan for a just transition should be published in a report within six months of an updated Marine Policy Statement.*

In January 2025, as part of a Written Statement on the Marine Environment, the Government recognised that accelerating development of marine activities is increasing marine spatial tensions. Government has committed to work with the industry to maintain its viability into the future and ensure it continues to make a significant contribution to coastal communities.

The funding available through the £360m Fishing & Coastal Growth Fund will provide additional investment over the next 12 years. We will work with the industry to target investment where it matters most. For example, by considering investment in new technology and equipment to modernise our fleet; training and skills to upskill the workforce and back the next generation of fishers; revitalising our coastal communities; and promoting and supporting the seafood sector to export our high-quality produce across the world.

The Government therefore partially agrees with this recommendation. The government has committed to supporting the fishing industry to adapt to increasing marine spatial tensions, but we disagree that a plan is required for a just transition, as we will already be working with the industry to maintain its viability into the future

Marine Protection and Recovery

Marine Protected Areas

Recommendation at paragraph 62: *We call on the Government to ban seabed damaging practices, such as bottom trawling, dredging and mining for aggregates, within offshore Marine Protected Area boundaries.*

This Government is taking action to ensure activities do not damage our MPAs. The Government is committed to the global target to effectively protect 30% of the ocean by 2030, and to delivering this target at home, alongside our responsibilities under domestic and international law to manage our MPAs.

In England, there are 181 MPAs covering approximately 40% of our seas, protecting important, rare and threatened habitats and species. Around 60% of these MPAs already have byelaws in place to prevent damage from fishing activity. In addition, in June 2025, the MMO [commenced a consultation](#) on proposals to ban bottom trawling in a further 41 MPAs, covering 30,000 km², equivalent to 13% of England's waters.

The Government's policy is not to introduce whole-site bans on bottom-towed fishing gear in MPAs. Our approach is to only restrict fishing which is assessed as damaging to the specific protected features

in each MPA, based on advice from the Statutory Nature Conservation Bodies (Natural England and the Joint Nature Conservation Committee). Sometimes management measures will involve a ban across the whole site, where the features to be protected cover the whole site, and in other cases they will not.

For marine industries such as aggregate dredging, activities that could impact MPAs are managed through the marine licensing and planning consent systems. As part of this process, applications for activities in MPAs are subject to a Habitats Regulations Assessment (HRA) or Marine Conservation Zone (MCZ) Assessment to ensure potential impacts on MPAs are properly assessed, avoided or mitigated. Activities that damage MPA features can only be approved if they pass the HRA or MCZ derogations tests.

Highly Protected Marine Areas (HPMAs) provide the highest level of marine protection in English waters by taking a whole site approach, where the entire marine ecosystem is the protected feature. The conservation objective of HPMAs is to restore the marine ecosystem to a natural state. MMO ran a formal consultation on a proposed byelaw to prohibit commercial and recreational fishing across all three HPMAs. The Government will take a decision on this byelaw in due course.

The Government therefore partially agrees with this recommendation. Defra is working to ensure damaging practices do not occur within our MPAs where they could harm protected habitats and species, but blanket bans are disproportionate and not in line with legislation.

Recommendation at paragraph 67: *We recommend that the Department for Environment, Food and Rural Affairs (DEFRA) reinstates funding to ensure the long-term data collection and monitoring at Lyme Bay is sustained to enable scientific analysis of the benefits of whole-site approaches for marine protection. We urge DEFRA to make this decision urgently to ensure the continuous data collection at this site is not compromised.*

The Government agrees that the research at Lyme Bay is highly valuable, and Defra is in discussion with Natural England (NE) to continue the long-term monitoring of Lyme Bay. Lyme Bay is an important site in the network of MPAs. With the support of Defra, Lyme Bay is the longest socioecological monitoring study of an MPA site, with 15 years of dedicated marine conservation research.

Recommendation at paragraph 72: *We urge the Government to expand the network of Highly Protected Marine Areas (HPMA) to 10% of UK waters by 2030 to meet 30by30 targets, based on the evidence of their effectiveness in enabling marine nature recovery. The Marine*

Recovery Fund should be used to assist the establishment of new HPMA. To ensure consistent progress across the UK, the Government should also consider using the UK Marine Policy Statement to set indicative targets or expectations for HPMA coverage within each devolved administration. This would help ensure that the 30by30 target is met through coordinated contributions from all nations. The plan for designating more HPMA should be published in a report by January 2026.

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Recommendation at paragraph 77: We call on the Government to maintain the status of designated Marine Protected Areas and ensure the expansion of the MPA network to cover vulnerable sites of comparable biodiversity to maximise its effectiveness.

Marine protection is a devolved responsibility, and this response covers the Secretary of State waters only.

This Government is taking action to protect our MPAs and enable marine nature recovery. Defra recognises that marine ecosystems are facing growing challenges, including biodiversity loss, climate change, and pressure from human activity. In response, the Government has committed to both national and international conservation goals, alongside broader ambitions such as the Clean Power Mission.

Defra recognises the role that maintaining effective MPAs plays in these. In England, around 40% of our waters are already designated as MPAs, including 3 HPMA, which meets the coverage aspect of the 30by30 target. Defra's priority is to ensure these areas are effectively managed. HPMA have an important role to play in the MPA network but the Government disagrees with setting a specific target for the amount of HPMA in Secretary of State waters.

In England we also have a statutory target under the Environment Act 2021, for at least 70% of protected species and habitats in MPAs to be in favourable condition by 2042, with the remainder in recovering condition.

The Government is currently reviewing the MPA network in England to ensure sites are in the right place with the right protection. The review will explore ways to better address the biodiversity crisis and improve climate change resilience, while supporting wider Government objectives including Good Environmental Status and Net Zero. The review will consider the role further HPMA could play. Defra continues to focus on ensuring our three designated HPMA are effectively monitored and managed.

The Marine Recovery Fund (MRF) is being established to enable offshore wind developers to discharge the requirement to provide environmental compensation for unavoidable adverse impacts of their projects to an MPA. Through the MRF, Defra has committed to designating new MPAs and/or extending existing MPAs in Secretary of State waters to deliver sufficient strategic compensation to compensate for likely environmental effects of offshore wind development. Compensatory MPAs will be fully funded by offshore wind developers through the MRF. These MPAs are specifically to compensate for the impacts on the seabed from offshore wind and do not have the same objective as HPMAs. Implementing these compensatory MPAs will help unlock multiple offshore wind projects while ensuring the network continues to protect vulnerable habitats and biodiversity.

The Government therefore disagrees with the recommendation at paragraph 72, and partially agrees with the recommendation at paragraph 77.

Recommendation at paragraph 78: We recommend the Department for Environment, Food and Rural Affairs (DEFRA) and the Department for Energy Security and Net Zero (DESNZ) coordinate with The Crown Estate to ensure that offshore wind developments are developed away from the most sensitive and biologically diverse sites. This should be done by clearly setting out marine spatial areas (e.g. Marine Protected Areas and Highly Protected Marine Areas) where nature restoration is a priority, and habitats have long-term protection, so they are not compromised by future developments.

It is crucial for Defra to work closely with DESNZ and TCE. As previously noted, the Government has provided a strategic steer to TCE on the key risks and considerations related to potential future offshore wind development in the English sea. This guidance supports TCE in identifying suitable areas for future offshore wind leasing, helping to avoid the most environmentally sensitive areas including MPAs and HPMAs in those potentially suitable areas or mitigations where relevant. MSPri also helped to identify areas critical to other marine sectors and Government priorities. The outputs of this process will be incorporated into TCE's Marine Delivery Routemap which aims to help plan all marine sectors and nature in an integrated way.

This strategic steer is a result of a new, in-depth, and data-driven cross-government exercise, in which departments (supported by regulators and advisory bodies) assessed their policy priorities across the English marine space.

The Government therefore partially agrees with this recommendation.

Recommendation at paragraph 79: *We recommend that compensatory measures through the Marine Recovery Fund (MRF) should be directed to priority areas, particularly nature restoration initiatives, to ensure long-term nature recovery.*

The MRF will function as the key mechanism for delivering strategic compensatory measures (SCMs) to enable offshore wind developers to discharge the requirement to provide environmental compensation for unavoidable adverse impacts of their projects to an MPA. SCMs are likely to have a greater ecological impact than those delivered at a project level and the MRF will provide access to measures that are not directly available to OFW developers (e.g. MPA designation).

In addition, Defra is also [consulting](#) on reforms to compensatory measures to introduce further flexibility around environmental compensation for offshore wind and provide clarity to developers and regulators on compensation requirements, whilst delivering for nature and the marine environment.

Defra proposes these reforms will be delivered through a Statutory Instrument and associated guidance.

The Government therefore partially agrees with this recommendation.

International Marine Treaties and Global Marine Protection

International treaties

Recommendation at paragraph 88: *We urge the Government to set a clear timeline for introducing the necessary primary legislation to ratify the Global Oceans / High Seas Treaty to send a clear signal of prioritising global marine protection. The timeline for ratifying this should be published within a month of this report, and the treaty should be ratified no later than 20 September 2025, two years after the UK signed it.*

As the Foreign Secretary, David Lammy MP, noted in his Kew lecture in September 2024, the Government is completely committed to ratifying the BBNJ Agreement.⁴ Furthermore, as announced by Defra's Minister for Water and Flooding, Emma Hardy MP, in her speech at the Third United

⁴ Agreement under the United Nations Convention on the Law of the Sea on the Conservation and Sustainable Use of Marine Biological Diversity of Areas beyond National Jurisdiction.

Nations Ocean Conference in June 2025 – the Government has committed to introduce the legislation by the end of the year, which is needed in order to implement the BBNJ Agreement ahead of ratification.

The Government therefore partially agrees with this recommendation.

Recommendation at paragraph 92: *We call on the Government to set out how it will align its policies with the advisory opinion issued by the International Tribunal for the Law of the Seas, including recognising greenhouse gas emissions as marine pollution and implementing measures to prevent, reduce, and mitigate such pollution based on the best available science. The Government should publish its position within two months of the publication of this report.*

The UK has engaged closely with these Advisory proceedings and carefully considers the Tribunal’s Opinion. Climate change is recognised as one of the defining global challenges we face, and the UK is firmly committed to delivering our commitments under the Paris Agreement and recognises the UN Framework Convention on Climate Change (UNFCCC) system as the primary intergovernmental negotiating forum for climate action.

This Government continues to lead internationally, with an ambitious target to reduce all greenhouse gas (GHG) emissions by at least 81% by 2035 (excluding international aviation and shipping). The UK also championed the landmark agreement reached at the International Maritime Organisation’s (IMO) 83rd Marine Environment Protection Committee meeting in April 2025, that will reduce global shipping emissions, and continues to press for its adoption in October.

International leadership starts with strong domestic action. Recent steps include lifting the onshore wind ban, approving major solar projects, launching the Great British Energy and the Clean Power Action Plan, and initiating a new carbon capture, usage and storage (CCUS) industry in Britain.

The Maritime Decarbonisation Strategy, published in March 2025, sets goals to reduce the UK domestic maritime sector’s life fuel life-cycle GHG emissions by 2050, with interim goals for 2030 and 2040. Key measures include fuel regulation, expanding the UK Emissions Trading Scheme (ETS) to maritime from 2026, and exploring measures to reduce emissions at berth and from smaller vessels. The UK is also addressing evidence gaps to include coastal wetlands in the GHG inventory, working through the UK Blue Carbon Evidence Partnership.

Internationally, the UK leads the Global Ocean Alliance and supports developing nations through the Blue Planet Fund.

The Government therefore partially agrees with this recommendation.

Overseas territories

Recommendation at paragraph 98: *The UK Government should commit to continued and enhanced funding to deliver marine conservation initiatives through its Biodiversity Challenge Funds and Blue Belt Programme, which have delivered excellent marine conservation objectives globally. If the Government is to continue to prioritise climate action and marine conservation in Overseas Territories, despite cuts to Official Development Assistance spending, it must set out as a matter of urgency how it will do this. The Government should publish this explanation in its response to this report.*

Defra has continued its support for the UK Overseas Territories through Darwin Plus. This includes bringing the new biodiversity strategy to publication thereby improving the reach and effectiveness of not just the programme but wider efforts to improve and protect biodiversity and strengthen climate resilience across the Overseas Territories.

Since its inception in 2012, Darwin Plus has invested more than £56 million in over 340 environmental projects benefiting the marine and terrestrial environments across the Overseas Territories. Each project addresses at least one of the four programme themes:

- Biodiversity: improving and conserving biodiversity, and slowing or reversing biodiversity loss and degradation;
- Climate change: responding to, mitigating and adapting to climate change and its effects on the natural environment and local communities;
- Environmental quality: improving the condition and protection of the natural environment;
- Capability and capacity building: enhancing the capacity within the Overseas Territories to support the environment in the short- and long-term.

Currently, Defra is finalising plans to fund successful 2025/26 project proposals. Applicants have been advised to expect updates over the summer. Updates will also be made available on the Darwin Plus website at: www.darwinplus.org.uk.

For funding beyond March 2026, Defra has secured a multi-year funding commitment through the most recent Spending Review as part of its funding for nature. The department will continue to engage closely with stakeholders to ensure transparency and to support continuity wherever possible.

In addition, the Blue Belt Programme provides support for marine protection and sustainable management to both official development assistance (ODA) and non-ODA eligible Territories. The fact that more Overseas Territories have joined the Programme in recent years is a testament to the success of this partnership.

Recognising that the UK Overseas Territories are disproportionately impacted by the nature and climate crisis, for 2025/26 the Blue Belt Programme received an increase in funding (from £8m in 24/25 to £8.5m–£6.5m non-ODA, £2m ODA) to aid the development of the ‘Climate’ pillar of support. The aim of this pillar is to improve adaptive capabilities, climate resilience and prosperity of coastal communities, alongside more sustainable management of marine and coastal resources.

The UK Government is clear on its intention to support the UK Overseas Territories via programmes such as the Blue Belt, and to remain a global leader in ocean protection.

The Government therefore agrees with this recommendation.