Written evidence submitted by the RSPB (REW0015)

The RSPB's response to the Welsh Affairs Committee's inquiry on renewable energy in Wales

The RSPB is grateful for the opportunity to provide evidence in support of the Welsh Affairs Committee's inquiry.

Summary

The RSPB agrees that Wales has significant potential for offshore power generation, and that this presents an opportunity for a post COVID-19 economic recovery. However, a truly **green recovery** is needed to ensure that our response to climate change does not deepen the ecological emergency. A just and sustainable green recovery would also support the Welsh coastal communities and businesses (such as wildlife tourism and fisheries) which depend on healthy marine wildlife in Welsh seas.

To deliver offshore renewable energy in Wales as part of a green recovery, strategic marine spatial planning is needed to ensure the right renewables technology is put in the right places, with enough space for nature. This would:

- address ecological impacts at the early stages of planning;
- guide the siting of developments away from the most ecologically sensitive areas;
- assess and minimise the cumulative impacts on habitats and species; and
- provide greater certainty to developers and other sectors.

The RSPB

The RSPB is the largest conservation organisation in Europe, with more than 1.2 million members, over 2,000 employees and around 12,000 volunteers. It has over 200 nature reserves across the UK, wild havens where everyone can get closer to nature and home to 80 per cent of our rarest or more threatened bird species. The RSPB also works internationally and is a leading player in BirdLife International, a partnership of conservation organisations working to save nature across the world.

In Wales, where the RSPB is known as RSPB Cymru, we have approximately 60,000 members (including 9,000 youth members). We currently employ around 170 staff across Wales and have 18 nature reserves in the country.

The RSPB and renewable energy

The RSPB supports urgent action to tackle the climate and nature emergencies. Decarbonising energy is a vital part of efforts to reach net zero. However, urgent action is required to ensure that action on climate change does not deepen the ecological emergency. This means ensuring the right renewables technology in the right places with sufficient monitoring.

The RSPB has had strong engagement in renewable casework in Wales, including tidal and wind energy projects. We would be happy to provide additional information on specific technologies.

A climate and ecological emergency

Decarbonising energy is a vital part of efforts to reach net zero targets and requires increased deployment of renewable technology. However, the current approach to planning offshore renewables jeopardises nature *and* net zero. Government must integrate action on energy and net zero with nature, to provide joint solutions to the climate and ecological emergencies.

Expansion of renewable energy must be delivered in harmony with nature. Renewables must be located in areas of lower ecological sensitivity with monitoring to assess impacts.

Wales' seabirds

Wales is home to significant populations of seabirds. These include more than half the world's Manx shearwaters and the fourth largest gannet colony in the world. These birds rely on the Welsh coast and seas to nest and rear their chicks. Unfortunately, some seabirds breeding in Wales are declining. For example, Wales' breeding Kittiwakes have declined by 35% since 1986 and Puffins are still recovering from previous historic population crashes.

Seabirds face numerous dangers. These include climate change impacts, entanglement in plastic and fishing gear, disturbance, predators at breeding sites and loss of habitat. Poorly located marine renewable developments would add further pressure.

Marine spatial planning

Since the Welsh National Marine Plan (WNMP) was developed, ambitions for development (particularly renewables) in Welsh seas have grown significantly. Potential impacts to marine ecosystems from marine developments include wildlife

collision, disturbance, marine noise, habitat loss, and loss of access to preferred foraging areas (displacement).

The marine environment is not currently resilient and a recent evaluation shows that the status of some groups of species, such as seabirds, is worsening across the UK. Marine planning must therefore ensure that marine development ambitions are delivered in a way which does not further hinder the achievement of Good Environmental Status.

The WNMP does not have a spatial component. As Welsh seas become more crowded, we believe the marine planning system must operate at a strategic and spatial level to:

- address ecological impacts at the early stages of planning;
- guide the siting of developments away from the most ecologically sensitive areas;
- assess and minimise the cumulative impacts on habitats and species; and
- provide greater certainty to developers and other sectors.

A marine development plan, such as those that are commonplace on land, would be one way to achieve this.

February 2021