



DELIVERING ECOSYSTEM- BASED MARINE SPATIAL PLANNING IN PRACTICE

A first assessment for the UK and Ireland

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ABOUT WWF

WWF is the world's leading independent conservation organisation. We're creating solutions to the most important environmental challenges facing the planet so people and nature can thrive. This involves working with businesses, communities and governments in over 100 countries. Together, we're safeguarding the natural world, tackling climate change and empowering people to use natural resources sustainably.

Like oceans and seas globally, the health of UK marine ecosystems is under significant threat owing to a variety of pressures, including the impacts of climate change. WWF is a key stakeholder in the development of marine plans around the UK, seeking to ensure that the resilience and health of ecosystems are at the heart of sustainable development.

The views and opinions expressed in this summary document are those of WWF-UK and do not necessarily reflect the views of UNEP-WCMC. A full explanation of the methods, results, assumptions and limitations can be found in the original report, which can be downloaded [here](#) and should be cited as:

WWF (2017). Delivering ecosystem-based marine spatial planning in practice: An assessment of the integration of the ecosystem approach into UK and Ireland Marine Spatial Plans. Pp. 1-132.

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INTRODUCTION

Marine spatial planning (MSP) is establishing itself around the world as a tool to better manage how our seas are used. In the UK and Ireland, all waters will have plans in place by 2021 at the latest, which have to be “ecosystem-based”, working across borders to deliver for nature conservation and leading to a sustainable blue economy.

This study is the first to assess existing UK and Irish marine plans and processes against a consistent set of criteria on what ecosystem-based MSP means in practice. As such, it offers an early indication about the effectiveness and ambition of MSP in the UK and Ireland, highlighting areas of positive progress as well as areas that could be improved.

AN ECOSYSTEM-BASED APPROACH IN MSP - WHAT DOES IT MEAN?

An ecosystem-based approach (EBA) to marine planning is a legal requirement and policy commitment across the UK and Ireland, but what does it mean in practice? This concept in general can be traced back to the Convention on Biological Diversity, which developed twelve complementary and interlinked principles in 1998 (the “Malawi Principles”¹) to guide its implementation. This is underpinned by sound science, a precautionary approach and a commitment to adaptive and inclusive management, bringing in stakeholder expertise from an early stage.

However, as this report shows, there is no standard definition of how an ecosystem-based approach should be applied to MSP, which makes it difficult to assess how effective these plans are. What we do know is that if MSP can apply the ecosystem-based approach as its overarching framework, important ecological areas can be safeguarded, especially if not already legally protected, and negative pressures on the health of the ecosystem as a whole can be greatly reduced.

In the absence of any clear definition of what EBA means in reality, and as MSP evolves, there is therefore a real need to develop a consistent way to judge if plans are ecosystem-based or not. As an active stakeholder in MSP around the world, WWF is uniquely placed to do this, comparing MSP processes based on a common set of criteria.

¹ <https://www.cbd.int/ecosystem/principles.shtml>



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REPORT METHODS

In summer 2017 WWF commissioned the United Nations Environment Programme World Conservation Monitoring Centre (UNEP-WCMC) to assess a range of existing UK and Irish plans, at a range of scales, against two sets of criteria for ecosystem-based MSP. The first is a checklist toolbox developed by the BalticScope Project², previously tested in the Baltic Sea, while the second is a draft set of questions developed by WWF for our European network.

The plans chosen and available at the time of writing were:

- East England inshore and offshore marine plans (2014);
- South England inshore and offshore marine plans (public consultation version, November 2016);
- Welsh National Marine Plan (Draft provided by Welsh Government, June 2017);
- Scottish National Marine Plan (2015);
- Shetland Islands Marine Spatial Plan (4th edition, 2015);
- Sound of Mull Marine Spatial Plan (2010)

For completeness across borders, the Republic of Ireland's "Harnessing our Ocean Wealth" framework (2012) was also included, recognising that a more detailed marine plan is in development.

Both sets of criteria contained key elements of ecosystem-based MSP drawn from the Malawi Principles, translated into a MSP context, including the degree of stakeholder involvement, way in which the Precautionary Principle (which allows for action to protect the environment or human health from potential threats in situations of scientific uncertainty) had been embedded, and the way in which environmental information had been used when developing spatial policies. The Strategic Environmental Assessments of each plan were also considered.

² http://www.balticscope.eu/content/uploads/2015/07/BalticScope_Ecosystem_Checklist_WWW.pdf

RESULTS

Our research found that the ecosystem-based approach has been partly adopted by all the UK and Irish marine plans, but there are considerable variations in implementation. As of November 2017, **no planning authority can claim to be taking a completely ecosystem-based approach.** Overall, the Scottish and Welsh plans were considered to have most comprehensively adopted an ecosystem-based approach, but important gaps still remain that have the potential to undermine other positive aspects. It is important to stress that these criteria for ecosystem-based MSP are as interlinked as the underlying EBA Malawi Principles – applying only a selection of them is not an option.

While each plan had some good parts, across all plans there were some common challenges, particularly in assessing if the balance of plan policies was equitable, a lack of spatial detail, variation in applying the Precautionary Principle, and aligning with terrestrial planning. Failing to get these right risks undermining the long-term success of MSP wherever it is happening.

Summary table of WWF Checklist question responses from all seven marine plans

Q	WWF Checklist questions Does the MSP plan and process...	East England	South England	Wales	Ireland	Scotland	Shetland	Sound of Mull
1	...set out a long-term vision and a path to get there?	Partly	Partly	✓	✓	✓	Partly	Partly
2	...support the designation and management of Marine Protected Areas?	✓	✓	✓	Partly	✓	✓	✓
3	...allocate development based on environmental criteria, as well as economic and social factors?	Partly	Partly	Partly	Partly	Partly	✓	✓
4	...show support for integrated coastal management?	Partly	Partly	✓	Partly	✓	✓	✓
5	...safeguard and enhance key ecosystem services? (as BS MSP Q5)	✓	✓	✓	✓	✓	✓	Partly
6	...involve stakeholders and community knowledge/expertise from an early stage? (as BS MSP Q8)	✓	✓	✓	✓	✓	✓	✓
7	...have a strong strategic environmental assessment?	Partly	Partly	✓	✗	✓	✓	✓
8	...have an adaptive approach to deal with new circumstances? (as BS MSP Q10)	✓	✓	✓	✓	✓	✓	Partly
9	...embed the precautionary principle? (as BS MSP Q3)	Partly	Partly	✓	✗	✓	✓	Partly
10	...show evidence of coordination with other plans?	✓	✓	✓	✓	✓	✓	✓

N.B. Very similar questions in the two checklists (noted in brackets) were assessed together as one question, and the identical results have been duplicated in both tables.

Summary table of Baltic SCOPE Checklist question responses from all seven marine plans

Q	Baltic SCOPE Checklist questions	East England	South England	Wales	Ireland	Scotland	Shetland	Sound of Mull
1	Does MSP support the achievement and/or contribute to maintaining GES?	Partly	✓	✓	✓	✓	Partly	Partly
2	Is the best knowledge and practice applied in planning?	✓	✓	✓	✓	✓	✓	✓
3	Is the precautionary principle considered during planning? (as WWF Q9)	Partly	Partly	✓	✗	✓	✓	Partly
4	Are alternatives used in planning?	✓	✓	✓	✓	✓	✓	✓
5	Is the assessment of ecosystem services included in planning? (as WWF Q5)	✓	✓	✓	✓	✓	✓	Partly
6	Is mitigation applied in planning?	Partly	Partly	✓	✗	✓	✓	✓
7	Is a holistic systems perspective used in planning?	✓	✓	✓	✓	✓	✓	Partly
8	Is participation and communication ensured in planning including the SEA? (as WWF Q6)	✓	✓	✓	✓	✓	✓	✓
9	Is the subsidiarity aspect and coherence between levels considered in planning?	✓	✓	✓	✗	✓	✓	✓
10	Is adaptation considered in planning? (as WWF Q8)	✓	✓	✓	✓	✓	✓	Partly

N.B. Very similar questions in the two checklists (noted in brackets) were assessed together as one question, and the identical results have been duplicated in both tables.



WALES

The draft Wales National Marine Plan scored highly on setting a strong strategic vision and high level set of objectives, as well as incorporating ecosystem services. However, there was concern that spatial policies have not been created using environmental information, which may undermine these positive strategic aspirations.

SCOTLAND

The combination of a national framework and more detailed regional plans is a key strength of the Scottish process, as while both the Scottish National Marine Plan and Shetland Regional Marine Plan did not meet all the criteria, together they offered a strong package. Shetland in particular scored strongly on producing spatial guidance for future activities, based on environmental criteria and was the best at embedding the Precautionary Principle of all UK plans.

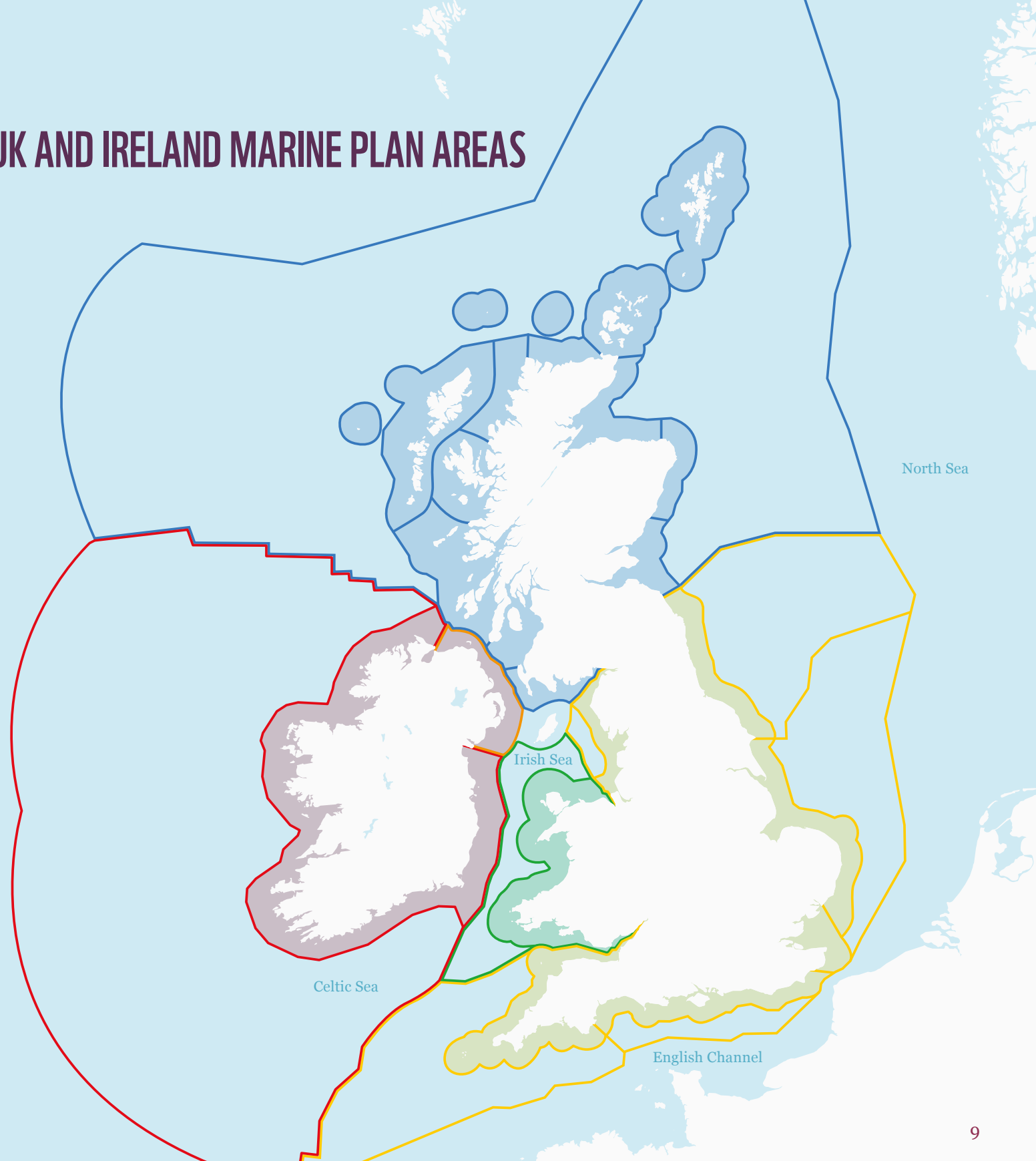
IRELAND

Although not a marine plan per se, the overarching Framework “Harnessing Our Ocean Wealth” does set out a vision for future planning. There was, however, some concern identified regarding the unbalanced aspiration of the document for economic growth and the lack of reference to the Precautionary Principle that could undermine application of the ecosystem-based approach at later stages of MSP.

ENGLAND

Both the East England and draft South England Marine Plans only partially met the various criteria, with improvements needed particularly in providing clarity on the prioritisation and relationship between policies. The few spatial policies produced also did not incorporate environmental information. Stakeholder engagement for both processes was, however, extensive and inclusive.

UK AND IRELAND MARINE PLAN AREAS





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WWF RECOMMENDATIONS

MSP is a relatively new process in the UK and Ireland, and as each plan is developed lessons must be learnt and shared to ensure the implementation of an ecosystem-based approach. As the first attempt to examine progress of marine plans in the UK and Ireland as a whole, this report will be of value to both planning authorities and their stakeholders. It has also raised interesting experiences of using checklists, especially where there is no accepted universal understanding of EBA principles and considerable variation in the state, scale and approach of plans themselves.

Nevertheless, there are some important recommendations to guide the future direction of MSP in the UK and Ireland:

- A nested two-tier approach to MSP can allow plans to become detailed at a finer scale where needed. It is not enough to simply have a high level plan of general principles with no locational guidance.
- Plan policies should be as spatially explicit as possible to reduce uncertainty and outline prioritisation, with these areas based on a clear balance of environmental, social and economic constraints, building in future trends.
- Planners should incorporate and safeguard ecosystem services, including the less obvious services or those services that do not have a monetary value, such as cultural or intrinsic appreciation of nature.
- More work is needed to examine how the Precautionary Principle can be truly embedded into MSP, especially if and where the evidence base is not considered good enough to make spatial policies.
- A stronger framework for integrating marine and terrestrial planning, as well as with neighbouring marine plans, is essential.
- The private, public and third sectors should work together to better communicate the benefits of ecosystem-based MSP, as well as the risks if these plans still do not meet all of these criteria.
- These checklists should be further defined to provide detailed guidance or allow a spectrum of possible answers, to deal with the varied nature of these plans in both geographic scale and process.



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