

# LINK briefing paper on commissioned report Community Engagement Advocacy Support by Howell Marine Consulting

## Introduction

Scottish Environment LINK commissioned Howell Marine Consulting to review existing legislation and institutional models relating to local governance and community co-management of Scotland's marine environment. The purpose of this work was to better understand how current marine decision-making structures support (or fail to support) meaningful community participation, and to identify opportunities where more enabling and empowering mechanisms could be embedded into government policy and future programmes.

There is a clear and growing rationale for strengthening community involvement in marine planning and management. Increased participation can support improved wellbeing in coastal areas, build climate resilience and enhance local economic regeneration in line with a just transition. Strengthening opportunities for local people to shape decisions that affect their marine environment would support ambitions for democratic renewal and localism. In practice, effective community involvement can generate wider benefits including stronger social cohesion and more locally driven economic opportunities.

The report found that although Scotland has strong enabling legislation for community engagement, its implementation in the marine context is piecemeal and often under-resourced. In particular, it highlighted Regional Marine Planning Partnerships (RMPPs), as established under the Marine (Scotland) Act 2010, as the one of the most direct potential pathways for embedding community input into decision-making at the regional scale.

Building on the report's high-level findings, LINK has refined a series of more targeted policy opportunities to enhance local engagement and genuinely participatory marine governance for Scotland.

## **1. Implement and resource Regional Marine plans across Scotland, and embed with mechanisms for local voices.**

The Scottish Government should commit to fully implementing and resourcing Regional Marine Planning Partnerships in all 11 Scottish Marine Regions by 2030. Currently only 3 of 11 MPPs exist, and none have statutory plans yet. This requires clear political commitment and prioritisation, and adequate resourcing to close this gap and establish community-focused marine planning at a regional level. Regional Marine Plans would also allow a more strategic and coordinated approach to ecological restoration initiatives, enabling funding streams such as SMEEF to support community-identified regional priorities, rather than isolated project-based interventions. Regional Marine Plans could help direct SMEEF (or other) investments



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towards incentives that deliver wider societal and community benefits alongside outcomes for nature and could be complemented by place-based trusts to provide long-term financing for regional environmental enhancement.

## **2. Establish a national community marine management fund**

Projects such as *Oceans of Value*, the establishment of Lamlash Bay No Take Zone, and the delivery of any coastal or marine habitat restoration initiative demonstrate how communities, when supported, can deliver lasting conservation and social benefits. A dedicated national fund would unlock more of this potential by enabling communities to play a more meaningful role in marine planning and co-management. Such a fund could strengthen local capacity, foster skills and training, and provide tools that help translate local knowledge into policy. It could also enhance participation in on-going projects, ensuring that community perspectives enrich decision-making and contribute to healthier seas and more resilient communities.

Such a fund would not necessarily need to be a new structure, as there are already numerous funding programmes that support nature-based community initiatives. Rather, it could be a dedicated funding stream set up within an existing structure, such as the Scottish Marine Environmental Enhancement Fund (SMEEF), specifically to support community capacity building and development of participatory tools.

## **3. Expand on local co-management pilots with Crown Estate Scotland**

The Crown Estate Scotland-led local asset management pilot was successful in Orkney in improving local involvement, trust and transparency. The CES has not published any further plans to develop this scheme, although more broadly The Crown Estate is developing new planning tools and approaches to incorporating greater social value into planning. There is an opportunity to build on learning from the Orkney pilot and expand the scheme into permanent co-management partnerships with clear criteria and resourcing for community-led governance. This model could be formalised and scaled up to other areas, where appropriate.

## **4. Embed process and ocean literacy in education and planning – Scottish Ocean Literacy strategy currently under development**

The Scottish Government should support development of a Scottish Ocean Literacy Strategy, which includes “process literacy” to help communities understand marine decision-making processes and how to input effectively. Communities need to understand not just why the environment matters, but how decisions for it are made. Building capacity and literacy will support increased participation, elevate the quality of participation and reduce stakeholder frustration. Potential key elements to include could be:

- Guidance on marine planning, licencing and how community input shapes decisions (“process literacy”);
- Education integrated into schools, adult training and community-led projects;



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- Accessible engagement tools, such as plain-language resources, creative methods and partnerships;
- Integration of literacy initiatives to RMPs and decision-making pathways;
- Connecting ocean health to community identity, local/intergenerational knowledge and public health;
- Monitoring and evaluation to track improvements in public understanding, participation and trust;
- Financing and resources to ensure delivery.

## 5. Improve policy frameworks for community co-management in marine areas

Scotland already has numerous legislative provisions for community engagement, but in practice these are largely fragmented across policy areas, interpreted inconsistently and rarely monitored for effectiveness. The result is that communities often experience participation as *ad hoc*, optional or tokenistic. To address this, there is a need for a clearer, more consistent framework for community involvement in planning and licencing. Additionally, such a framework should set out expectations for participation and co-management, rather than loosely defined “engagement”.

The full report can be accessed on LINK’s website under [Marine Community Engagement Advocacy Support](#). The report was commissioned by Scottish Environment LINK with funding from Esmée Fairbairn Foundation.



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