Community Engagement Advocacy Support

Scottish Environment LINK

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1   Introduction

The level of interest in community engagement and empowerment in decision-making addressing how we use the environment in Scotland has grown substantially in recent years. The Scottish Government has highlighted their interest in, and the need to involve local communities in nature restoration and environmental management, for both land and sea, but have not, yet, proposed how they will achieve this. Effective and inclusive public engagement is essential for making better informed decisions for more sustainable outcomes.

This report aims to provide Scottish Environment LINK (LINK) with an evidence base to inform the development of their community engagement advocacy asks for the 2026 election in Scotland. A key area of interest for LINK is ensuring that the mechanisms for delivering nature restoration are in place and effective, in particular the representation of 'communities' in marine decision making. By outlining a clear and practical route forward for achieving representation in decision making, LINK aim to increase their influence on political party manifestos and, ultimately, amplify the views and values of communities across Scotland.

LINK commissioned Howell Marine Consulting (HMC) to provide evidence and set of key findings and opportunities to consider in developing their community engagement advocacy. To support LINK, this report provides an overview of relevant Scottish legislation (Section 2) and policies and plans (Section 3), a review of the decision-making process in Scotland, including a system map and three case studies demonstrating different ways in which communities have influenced marine decisions in Scotland, an overview of different approaches to stakeholder engagement, and a final set of key findings and opportunities.

2   Provisions for Community Engagement in Scotland

2.1   Legislation

Several pieces of underpinning legislation seek to address the role of communities and wider stakeholders in decision-making in Scotland. These include provisions which address democracy and empowerment across society, those which relate to cross-cutting involvement in environmental policy and decision-making, and some of specific relevance to marine decision-making. The context of devolution and a historical focus on land reform and community empowerment have driven important policy and legislative shifts, creating a dynamic and encouraging framework for greater influence of people in decision-making.

The Scotland Act 1998 created the Scottish Parliament, defining which powers would be devolved from the UK Parliament and managed by the Scottish Government. The Act embeds the principles of power-sharing, accountability, openness and participation, and equal opportunities into devolved governance, providing the foundation for community involvement in environmental policymaking in Scotland. The Act also provides local authorities with the power to make decisions relating to all terrestrial planning activities down to mean low-water springs and marine fish farming (out to 12 nm).

The [Community Empowerment (Scotland) Act 2015](#) marked a significant step towards "greater localism in the way public services are designed and delivered in Scotland."[1] The Act aims to give communities greater influence and control over decisions and assets that affect them. It supports stronger community voices in public service planning, encourages local ownership or use of land and buildings, and promotes participation in decision-making processes.

The [Islands (Scotland) Act 2018](#) introduced measures to support and help meet the needs of Scotland's island communities. This included a requirement to develop a National Islands Plan that will set out the main objectives and strategy of the Scottish Ministers in relation to improving outcomes for island communities. The subsequent [National Islands Plan](#) was published in 2019 and contains several strategic objectives, including Strategic Objective 10: to empower diverse communities and different places. There were several actions linked to achieving this objective, which include:

- Taking forward the Local Governance Review with Convention of Scottish Local Authorities (COSLA) to create a system of local democracy that will be inclusive and improve people's lives.

- Support participatory processes aimed at providing island communities with a strong voice in the implementation of the National Islands Plan.

- Explore ways to strengthen the voice of island communities whilst capturing the differences between islands in local and national decision-making.

The [Local Governance Review](#) by COSLA, which has now gone through two phases (the most recent in 2024), highlighted several positive and negative experiences by communities when engaging with local decision making. Positives included political action and protest, and having their voices heard, while negative experiences included poor communication, tokenistic engagement, and a lack of representation. In 2024, a [joint statement](#) was published to continue progress of the Local Governance Review, which includes forming a cross-sector Democracy Matters steering group made up of Local Government representatives, community leaders and democratic innovators to help develop ambitious decision-making systems and processes.

In 2019, the Scottish Crown Estate Act was passed, which devolved the management of Crown Estate assets in Scotland to the newly established Crown Estate Scotland (CES), but accountable to Scottish Ministers and the Scottish Parliament. Under the Scottish Crown Estate Act 2019, there are also provisions to further transfer or delegate asset management to Local Authorities, Harbour authorities, community organisations, and public bodies as part of a broader local empowerment policy. The resulting CES Local Management Pilot Scheme included the potential for transfer of property management rights to Local Authorities and is discussed in Section 4.3.

For decisions specifically on how Scotland's marine environment is managed, the adoption of the [Marine and Coastal Access Act 2009](#) (MACAA 2009) by the UK Government was

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[1] Elliott, I.C., Fejszes, V. and Tàrrega, M. (2019), "The Community Empowerment Act and localism under devolution in Scotland: The perspective of multiple stakeholders in a council ward", International Journal of Public Sector Management, Vol. 32 No. 3, pp. 302-319. https://doi.org/10.1108/IJPSM-03-2018-0080

fundamental. The MACAA 2009 provides a UK-wide framework for managing the marine environment with a strong emphasis on stakeholder engagement. The Act includes the requirement for [Statements of Public Participation](#) (SPP) to be produced for marine plans, outlining how, when and why stakeholders will be involved, including timelines and opportunities for input. Authorities must ensure the SPP is brought to the attention of all interested and affected parties, including the general public. For example, the Marine Directorate published a [Stakeholder Engagement Strategy and SPP](#) for the NMP2 review, which sets out how the Scottish Government will engage with key stakeholders. A 2024 [MMO report](#) that explored the challenges, barriers and opportunities to local decision making, highlighted that the process of developing an SPP is important for setting out how stakeholders can be involved in marine plan development and ensuring these opportunities are accessible.

In 2010, the Scottish Government adopted the [Marine (Scotland) Act 2010](#), which applies to Scotland's inshore waters (0-12nm). This sets out the legislation required to develop a National Marine Plan for the Scottish marine area out to the continental shelf limits (with agreement with the UK government for matters between 12 and 200 nm) and contained the powers to establish regional Marine Planning Partnerships (hereafter Marine Planning Partnerships) and the development of regional marine plans for Scotland's inshore waters. The establishment of Marine Planning Partnerships and the development of regional marine plans provides an opportunity for, and actively encourages the involvement of, communities in the decision-making process on how Scotland's marine space is used. The status of marine planning in Scotland is discussed further in Section 3.

This section has highlighted that there are numerous provisions across key legislative instruments which provide a positive framework for supporting greater community involvement in decision-making in Scotland. While the requirement for stakeholder engagement is clear, there remains uncertainty over how well these provisions have been applied in practice and the progress made since their adoption. Through an evaluation of stakeholder engagement activity, a greater understanding of successful improvements and continuing challenges with stakeholder engagement can be achieved, which can inform future activity.

2.2 Policy and Plans

Scottish Government has established policy and guidance to embed legislative provisions relevant to engagement into decision-making. A number of these approaches relevant to marine decision making are set out below.

The [National Standards for Community Engagement](#) (NSCE), originally launched in 2005, provide a set of good practice principles to guide the process of engaging communities effectively in decision-making. The NSCE consists of seven key standards (Figure 1 that offer a consistent approach to quality community engagement across Scotland.

The NSCE support organisations in putting the Community Empowerment (Scotland) Act 2015 into practice, as well as shape the participation process of public bodies and provide guidance for community organisations on how to involve wider community interests. For example, Scotland's Blue Economy Vision mentions that it will draw on existing best practice, such as the NSCE, in conducting stakeholder engagement.
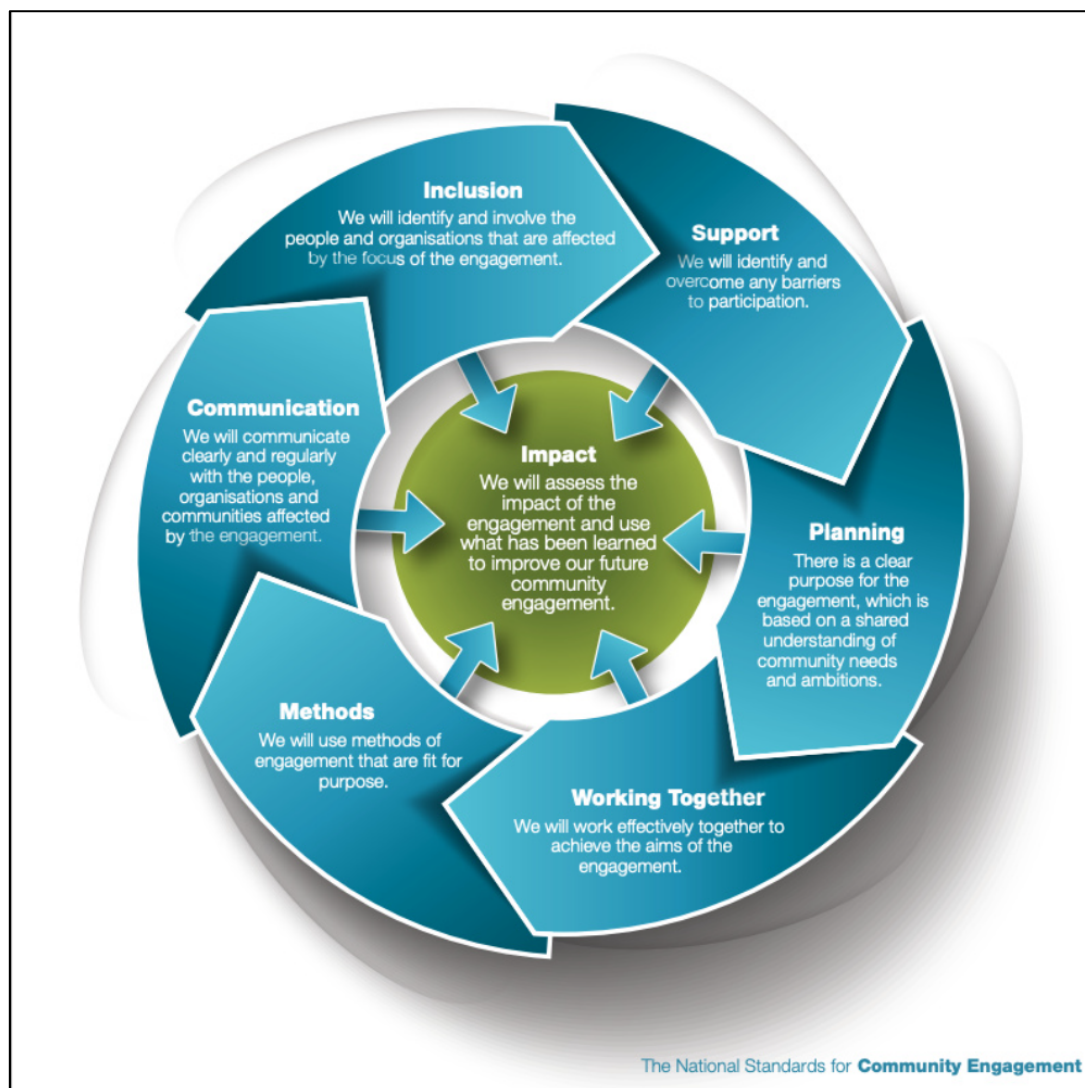
Figure 1: The seven standards of the National Standards for Community Engagement

The Scottish Government's Participation Handbook, published in 2024, is a practical guide developed to support Government staff in delivering effective participation in policymaking. The Handbook provides a range of information on the importance of participation, how effective participation is conducted, and different participatory methods. The Handbook further emphasises the importance of the NSCE as a "central benchmark and reference point for best practice" and provides additional information on opportunities for participation, including which approaches to engagement should be applied and when (i.e., inform, consult, involve, collaborate, and delegate).

The Marine Directorate's Stakeholder Engagement Strategy and SPP for the NMP2, for example, provides a range of information on NMP2 consultation, such as the marine planning context, the high-level purpose of the NMP2, the expected outcomes from stakeholder engagement, and the approach to engaging with stakeholders (Figure 2). All of these components reflect the guidance in the Participation Handbook on developing an engagement strategy.

The guidance for [Effective Community Engagement in Local Development Planning](#) provides a comprehensive framework for ensuring communities play a meaningful role in shaping local development plans.

- Part 1 – 'The Big Picture' sets out the context and highlights the benefits of strong community engagement.
- Part 2 – 'Levels of Engagement' explores the purpose of engagement at each stage of the plan-making process, offering varying opportunities for influence.
- Part 3 – 'Local Development Plan Preparation' explains the purpose and process of preparing a local development plan, identifying when and how different levels of engagement can be used. It stresses that engagement should be early, collaborative, proportionate, and meaningful.[2]
- Part 4 – 'Stage by Stage' offers detailed guidance on the appropriate levels of engagement throughout the development planning stages, including during impact assessments. It emphasises that multiple engagement approaches may be suitable at different points in the process.

The [Place Principle](#) promotes a shared understanding of what makes a place thrive by encouraging collaborative working across sectors and communities. It supports the idea that services, resources, and decision-making should be integrated and locally tailored to reflect the unique needs and opportunities of each place. By fostering local flexibility and partnership, the principle aims to deliver better outcomes for people and communities.

The [National Performance Framework](#) (NPF) set out a vision for collective wellbeing and the "kind of Scotland we all want to live in". To track our journey toward that vision, national indicators were developed to help measure progress. This approach encouraged a collaborative approach and called on people and organisations across all sectors to join forces in making life better for everyone in Scotland. However, the Scottish Government has [committed to a period of reform](#) of the NPF, with the aim of creating a framework that better drives public sector reform, improves collaboration between national and local governments, and empowers communities. At the time of writing, there were no changes to the NPF and the 11 National Outcomes remained in operation, with public bodies still required to have regard to them under the Community Empowerment Act. There are no updates available on the NPF reform.

The [Principles for Responsible Investment in Natural Capital](#) set out "ambitions and expectations for a values-led, high-integrity market for responsible private investment in natural capital to communities, investors, land owners, public bodies and other market stakeholders." One of the principles highlights the importance of investment that demonstrates engagement and collaboration and promotes early engagement so that communities can help inform future plans. While these Principles focus on terrestrial natural capital, interest in marine natural capital as investment opportunities is growing and the core principle of engagement and collaboration should continue to be applied.

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[2] For example, Orkney Islands Council have begun the process for revising their Local Development Plan and have published proposals for the Development Plan Scheme, which includes a timeline for activities relating to public engagement and consultation: https://www.orkney.gov.uk/media/dolaeqne/item-11-orkney-local-development-plan-development-plan-scheme.pdf

In Scotland, there is a wealth of guidance and frameworks in place for delivering stakeholder engagement, and there are examples of how the Scottish Government has aligned stakeholder engagement strategies accordingly. However, questions remain over the effectiveness of engagement activities and whether there are opportunities for improvement. Similarly with legislation in Scotland, an evaluation of the implementation of the above referenced guidance and frameworks for stakeholder engagement could provide valuable insights on how well stakeholder engagement is being conducted in Scotland and how it could be improved.

3   Marine planning

This section describes the approach to marine planning in Scotland as a fundamental process for engagement of society in marine and coastal issues.

Scotland's Blue Economy Vision sets out the Government's long-term ambitions for the marine environment to 2045. It is acknowledged within the Vision that delivering these ambitions will be challenging but highlights the potential for new opportunities and stresses that stronger policy coordination, cross-sector partnerships, and innovative decision-making tools will be needed. A key part to achieving Scotland's Blue Economy Vision is for Scotland to become an ocean literate and aware nation, where "*people value and respect Scotland's seas and they feel part of a coastal nation…*" and are "*empowered to participate in governance and decision making forums about Scotland's seas.*"

Scotland's first National Marine Plan was adopted in 2015 and emphasised that engagement with stakeholders must be appropriate, proportionate, and meaningful, and begin as early as possible to ensure that a wide range of views are fairly considered. This includes contributions from marine users, planners, statutory consultees, communities, representative organisations, public bodies, and the general public. Importantly, the plan encourages transparent decision-making, with a presumption in favour of publicising both marine and terrestrial components of development applications together, where applicable.

The development of Scotland's National Marine Plan 2 (NMP2) is currently underway and will provide an updated version of the NMP. The first draft of the NMP2 is expected to be consulted on in 2025. The development process of the NMP2 has been supported by a Stakeholder Engagement Strategy and Statement of Public Participation, which provides an overarching framework for how and when stakeholders will be involved in shaping the plan, which includes principles of inclusivity (i.e., ensuring a broad range of stakeholders are represented), targeted engagement (i.e., conducting efficient engagement through established for a), and transparency (i.e., a strategic and consistent approach that involves sharing information and outputs widely). The SPP for the NMP2 includes the Marine Directorate's approach to stakeholder engagement (Figure 1), which highlights keys stages of the NMP2 development process, key stakeholder groups, and the level of engagement required: collaborate, consult, keep informed, ad hoc communication (Section 4 of this report provides further detail on the types of stakeholder engagement). The NMP2 engagement approach in the SPP indicates that, although community groups and the general public are consulted with in several stages of the development of the NMP2, the majority of engagement is by being kept informed or through ad hoc communication.

Plan stage / stakeholder group	UKG, devolved administrations, other administrations	Public bodies	Local Coastal Partnerships, Marine Planning Partnerships	Representative bodies, charities	Wider Marine sectors	Academic and research	Other community groups	General public
Vision and objective setting	▲	▲	▲	▲	▲	▲	▲	▲
Strategic appraisal of NMP (2015) and refining scope of NMP2	▲	■	▲	✖	●	✖	●	●
Preparation of statutory impact assessments (SEA, BRIA, HRA, etc.)	■	■	■	■	■	■	●	●
Policy framework development	▲	■	■	■	▲	▲	▲	✖
Planning Position Statement	▲	▲	▲	▲	▲	▲	▲	▲
Draft Plan and Assessments	▲	▲	▲	▲	▲	▲	▲	▲
Monitoring and evaluation framework development	▲	■	▲	▲	▲	▲	✖	✖
Explanatory Report	✖	✖	✖	✖	✖	✖	✖	✖
Adopted NMP2 and post-adoption statement	✖	▲	✖	✖	✖	✖	✖	✖

■ Collaborate   ▲ Consult   ✖ Keep informed   ● Ad-hoc communication

Figure 2: Methods of engagement with key stakeholders as presented in the National Marine Plan 2 Stakeholder Engagement Strategy and Statement of Public Participation.

The first iteration of the NMP identified 11 marine planning regions for which regional marine plans could be developed[3] – bespoke marine plans that would capture the priorities of each marine region. The development of regional marine plans should be undertaken by their associated Marine Planning Partnerships, made up of marine stakeholders who reflect the interests of the region, including Local Authorities, Regional Inshore Fisheries Groups, and Local Coastal Partnerships. Marine planning powers are be delegated to Marine Planning Partnerships, although licensing and consenting powers will remain with the Marine Directorate and Local Authorities. Once regional marine plans are adopted, Marine Planning Partnerships will play a continuous role in:

- overseeing the implementation of the plan,
- monitoring their regions and the effects of the plan's policies,
- reviewing the plan's objectives and policies, and
- amending the plans if required or requested by Scottish Ministers.

The Marine Planning Partnerships can play an important role in providing a pathway for community views and priorities to be incorporated the decision-making process through the inclusion of local community groups and conducting consultations (in particular in-person events) within the region. However, although regional marine plans present a valuable opportunity to capture community priorities for the marine environment, the Marine (Scotland) Act 2010 *enables*, rather than *requires*, the creation of regional marine plans and, to date, no

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[3] https://www.gov.scot/policies/marine-planning/regional-marine-planning/

plans have been formally adopted despite three partnerships being established (in Shetland, Clyde, and Orkney). There have been on-going challenges in ensuring the effectiveness of the nested approach, including:

- a lack of consistent support for the partnerships by national government,
- a lack of vision of how the regional approach fits within the NMP process,
- uncertainty as to how the partnerships interact with Inshore Fisheries Groups on fisheries management, and, ultimately;
- a lack of certainty over the future of the regional marine planning process, particularly in areas where partnerships are yet to be established.

In 2020, a parliamentary inquiry by the Environment Climate Change and Land Reform Committee (ECCLR) highlight dissatisfaction by stakeholders in the slow progress of implementing RMPs and raised further concerns for regions that are currently experiencing the expansion of marine sectors, such as offshore wind and aquaculture. In their final report, the ECCLR Committee recommended that the Scottish Government:

"*review provisions of the Marine (Scotland) Act 2010 and wider legislation on community empowerment to identify legislative barriers to engagement and to identify opportunities to improve community representation in regional marine planning and marine licensing decisions.*"

In response, the Scottish Government considered the "*current legislation as written provides significant scope for a wide range of stakeholders to actively engage with marine planning. This is particularly the case for regional marine planning through the extensive public consultation process for developing RMPs and because these are delivered by Marine Planning Partnerships that can be comprised of community representatives themselves*".

However, the response from the Scottish Government does not fully address the concerns of the ECCLR Committee and more could be done to assess whether current legislation (the Marine Act *and* wider legislation) sufficiently enables community representation and empowerment in regional marine planning (as reflected in Section 6).

4 System map of marine decision-making in Scotland

There are several opportunities for members of the public and community groups to engage with marine decision-making in Scotland, from directly contacting their local authorities or MSP, to responding to public consultations on particular development proposals or marine plans. Figure 3 provides a system map of the different opportunities for engagement, highlighting key actions, engagement opportunities, authorities, and the level at which the different authorities can make decisions. Using the system map, it is possible to trace different pathways for stakeholder groups to engage with and influence marine management decisions at different scales across Scotland.
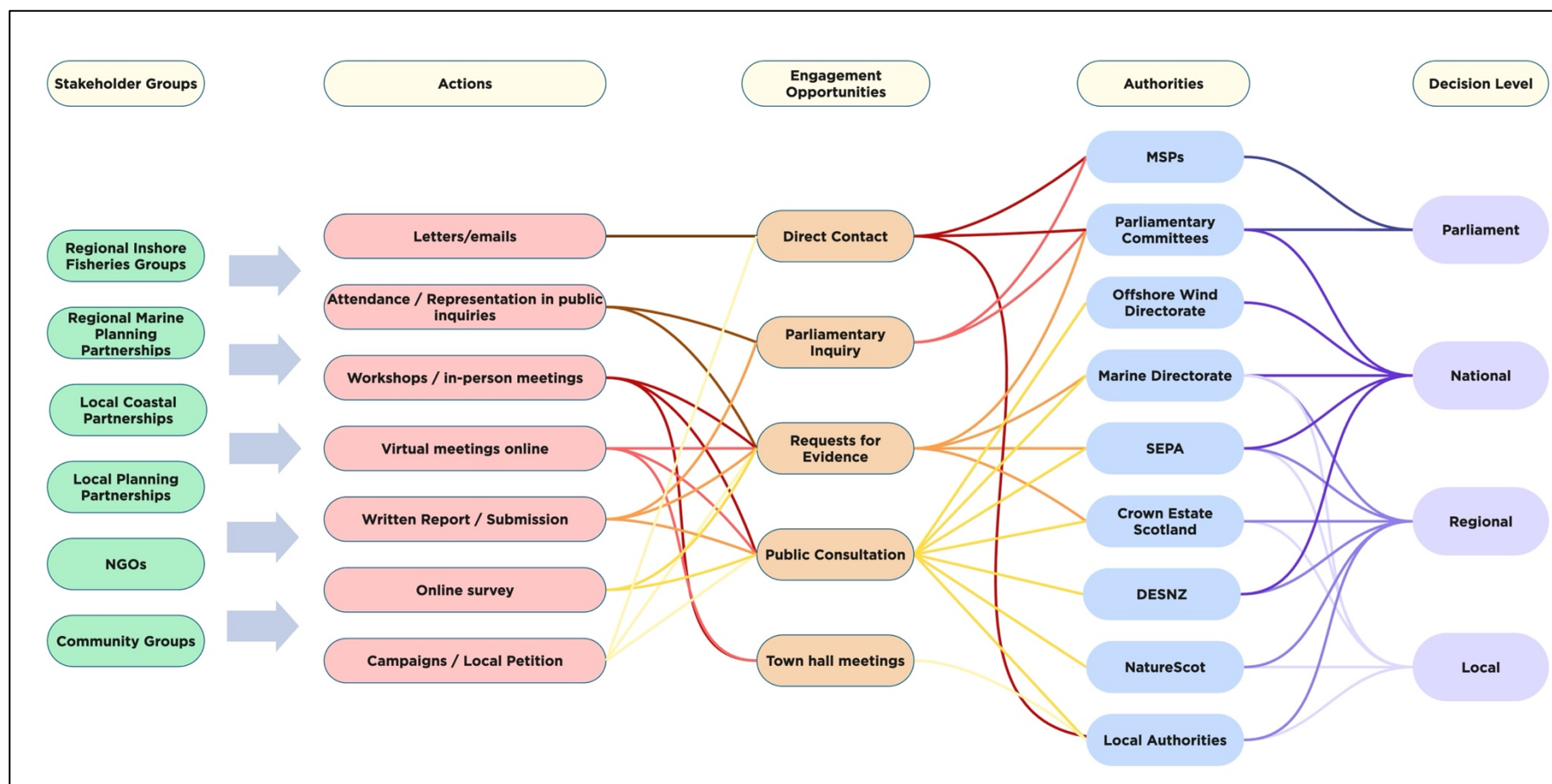
Figure 3: System map of the various pathways in which stakeholder groups can engage with marine decision-making. The map contains the different types of actions stakeholder groups can make to influence marine planning decisions, the opportunities for engaging with authorities (i.e., decision makers), and the different authorities in Scotland that make decisions at a political, national, regional, or local level.

*Connecting lines are coloured differently for presentation purposes only and do not indicate a specific value (e.g., importance or strength of connection).

For example, the system map for the Marine Directorate's NMP2 consultation and the Scottish Parliament's ECCLR Committee inquiry into RMPs (Figure 4) shows two different paths influencing marine planning decisions at local, regional, and national levels. In both cases, the opportunities to influence marine planning decisions were authority-led but the different opportunities for engagement required different types of actions by stakeholders. For example, the Marine Directorate's public consultation process included a range of engagement actions that had both low resource requirements (e.g., inviting written submissions) and high resource requirements (e.g., in-person drop-in events). All stakeholder groups had the opportunity to engage with all actions. The parliamentary inquiry, however, was a simpler approach that involved inviting written submissions and holding several in-person evidence sessions. Both the NMP2 consultation and the RMP inquiry provided opportunities for community groups and members of the public to engage but some opportunities were available only to invited stakeholders: for example, the in-person evidence sessions organised by the ECCLR committee and the workshops and forums for NMP2 were invite only. When engagement was invite only, communities and/or members of the public were either not represented or represented by a particular stakeholder group (e.g., a community group or NGO).
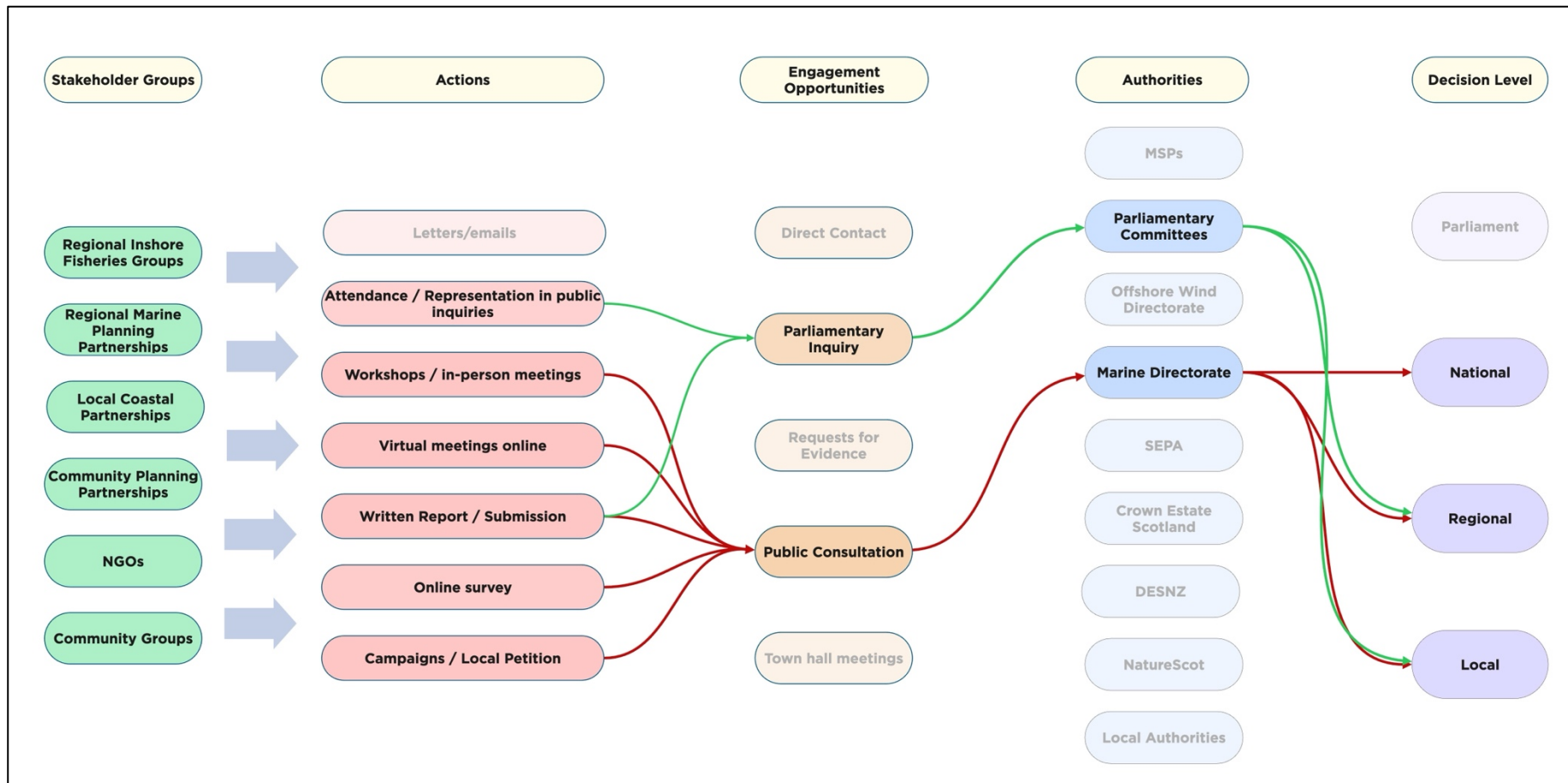
Figure 4: Engagement pathway for the National Marine Plan 2 (NMP2) and the Scottish Parliament's inquiry into Regional Marine Plans. The red lines show the pathway for engaging with the NMP2 consultation process, which was a single engagement opportunity but involved several different types of engagement actions. The green lines show the pathway for engaging with the Scottish Parliament's inquiry into Regional Marine Plans, which involved both written evidence and in-person evidence sessions. In both cases, all stakeholder groups had the opportunity to engage.

4.1 Case Study 1: Oceans of Value

The Scottish Wildlife Trust's Oceans of Value (OoV) project was conducted between 2018 and 2022 and aimed to collect information on the different ways Orkney's marine environment can be valued. The overarching intention of the project was to inform the development of Orkney's RMP, which was being led by Orkney Islands Council (OIC). The project focused on two key approaches:

1. Understanding the value of Orkney's marine region through using a marine natural capital assessment
2. Identifying how members of the local community value their surrounding coastal and marine environment through the use of the Community Voice Method (CVM)[4].

During the early stages of the project's development, members of OIC's marine spatial planning team were involved as advisors to help ensure the information collected and analysed was informative and useful for the development of the Orkney RMP.

While the natural capital assessment was conducted through a desk-based study, the CVM required an extensive amount of community engagement using a variety of techniques. The CVM can be broken down into the following key stages:

1. Stakeholder mapping exercise to identify key people to approach for interview
2. Interviews with identified stakeholders
3. Analysis of interview transcriptions
4. Development of a film using interview footage and based on interview analysis to ensure an even and unbiased selection of viewpoints.
5. Presentation of film at stakeholder workshops, followed by structured activities to discuss and build on the information provided in the film.
6. Reporting of interview and workshop findings.

While the OoV project was not a Scottish Government or Local Authority-led consultation or evidence gathering exercise, the involvement and collaboration with OIC was important for enabling the project findings to feed into the RMP development process. This association created a clear pathway between the data collection and engagement activity led by the Scottish Wildlife Trust and the development of the Orkney RMP and, subsequently, the decision-making process on how Orkney's marine environment will be managed (Figure 5).

The CVM approach used in the OoV project is a resource intensive approach to community engagement: in total the project took over two years to complete and involved significant staff time, travel (interviews and workshops), and external skillsets (e.g., a media company to make the film). However, the resulting outputs provide a valuable and detailed assessment of community priorities for Orkney's marine environment, which may not have been achieved using other, less intensive methods.

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[4] The CVM approach was developed by Gabriel Cumming and Carla Norwood in the USA and initially piloted in the UK by the Marine Conservation Society, who provided training and support to the SWT team.

Following the completion of the project in Orkney, the OoV film has been used to inform workshops across Scotland to support discussion on how the marine environment is managed and identify how different communities value their local marine environment. These follow up events were developed in collaboration with the Scottish Government's NMP2 team, who have used the findings to support their engagement process.
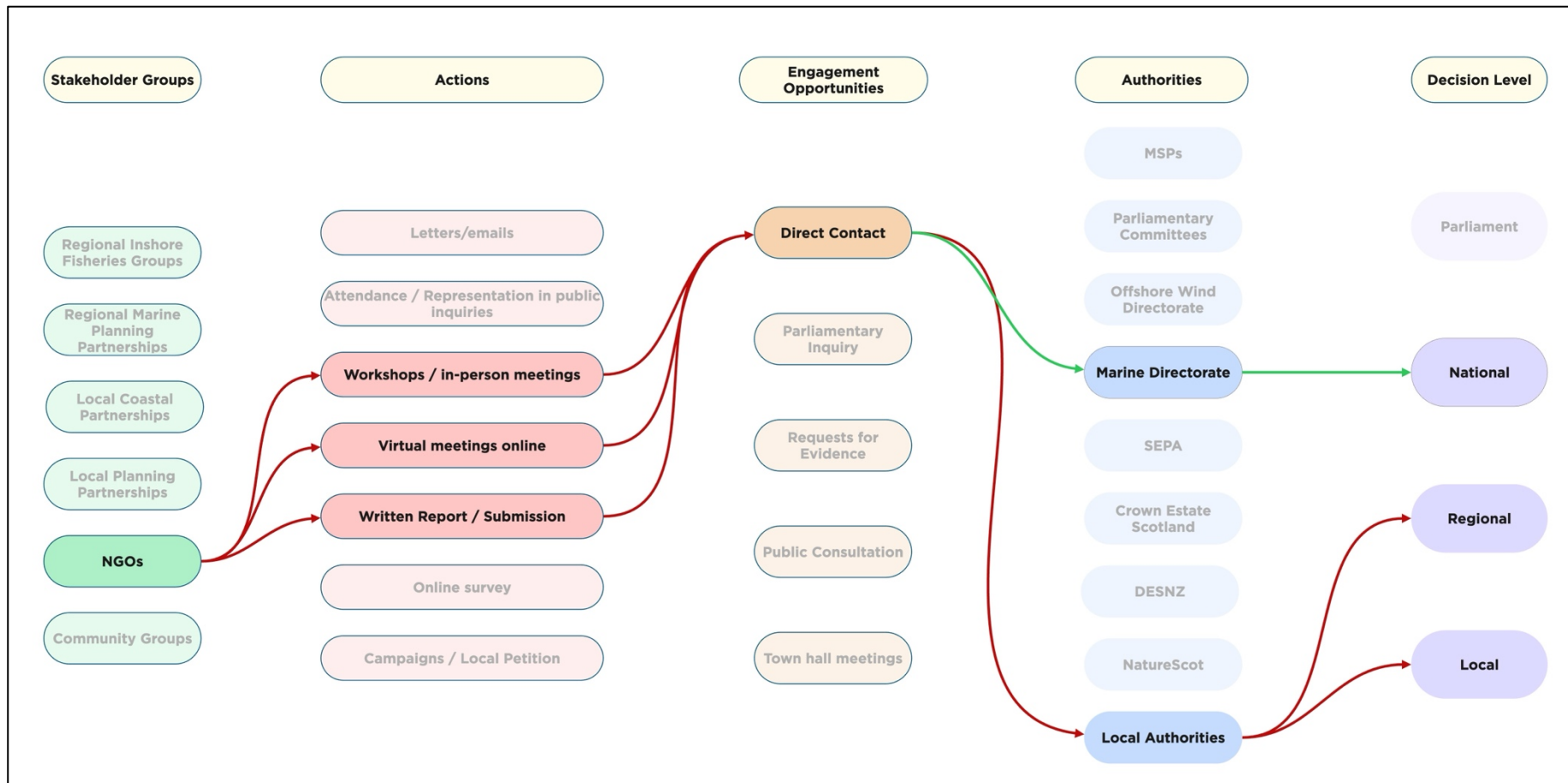
Figure 5: The engagement pathway of the Scottish Wildlife Trust's Oceans of Value project: The project was an NGO-led initiative that used a variety of actions to collect information on the marine natural capital assessment and how members of Orkney's community value their marine environment. The findings were given directly to Orkney Island's Council to support the development of the Orkney Regional Marine Plan (Red arrows), which, once adopted, will inform decisions at the local and regional level. The post-project workshops developed in collaboration with the Scottish Government's Marine Directorate (Green arrows) helped to inform the development of the NMP2.

4.2 Case Study 2: Community of Arran Seabed Trust No Take Zone

The designation of the Lamlash Bay No Take Zone (NTZ), resulting from 13 years of campaigning by two members of the Arran Community, who later formed the Community of Arran Seabed Trust (COAST), was the first community-led marine reserve to be established in Scotland.

Running from 1995-2008, a campaign led by two local community members to highlight the declining condition of the local marine environment, began a campaign to establish an NTZ within Lamlash Bay. The campaign began through organising several local events to gather local support for the protection of Lamlash Bay and concerted efforts to document the wildlife within the bay. Concurrent with this activity, COAST was writing to relevant Government departments and MPs (and later Members of Scottish Parliament (MSPs) after the Scottish Government was established) highlighting the issues and asking for support.

The growing level of community support for the NTZ—bolstered by the involvement of marine ecologists, the Marine Conservation Society, lawyers, planners, and Scottish Natural Heritage (now NatureScot)—was instrumental in building a strong, evidence-based case.

By 2003, the designation of England's first No Take Zone in Lundy Island served as a key precedent, strengthening the credibility and feasibility of COAST's proposal. With funding came the ability to organise more networking events, connect with policy influencers, and enhance the campaign's visibility.

A crucial partnership with the Marine Conservation Society (MCS) was formed, which brought in technical support and training for Seasearch, a citizen science programme enabling trained volunteers to record marine biodiversity. This partnership increased the volume and quality of ecological data, which COAST used to bolster its case with decision-makers.

As evidence accumulated and the network of support grew, MSPs began to take notice, and the strong and sustained community backing (including from local fishers) gave politicians the assurance they needed to move forward confidently.

In 2008, after more than a decade of advocacy, Lamlash Bay was officially designated as Scotland's first NTZ, marking a major milestone in marine conservation in Scotland. Since then, COAST has remained deeply involved in the decision-making process, such as regularly contributing evidence to parliamentary committees, exemplifying a commitment to long-term, sustained engagement as a driving force for lasting environmental change.

The Lamlash Bay NTZ engagement pathway (Figure 6) shows the variety of actions COAST undertook to raise awareness and garner support for better protection of Lamlash Bay (e.g., campaigns, in-person meetings, letters). These actions link to several engagement opportunities (e.g., direct engagement, public consultation) and multiple authorities. The variety of pathways used by COAST to influence local decision making signifies the lack of a clear avenue to engage with authorities when a community-led, ground-up approach is taken.
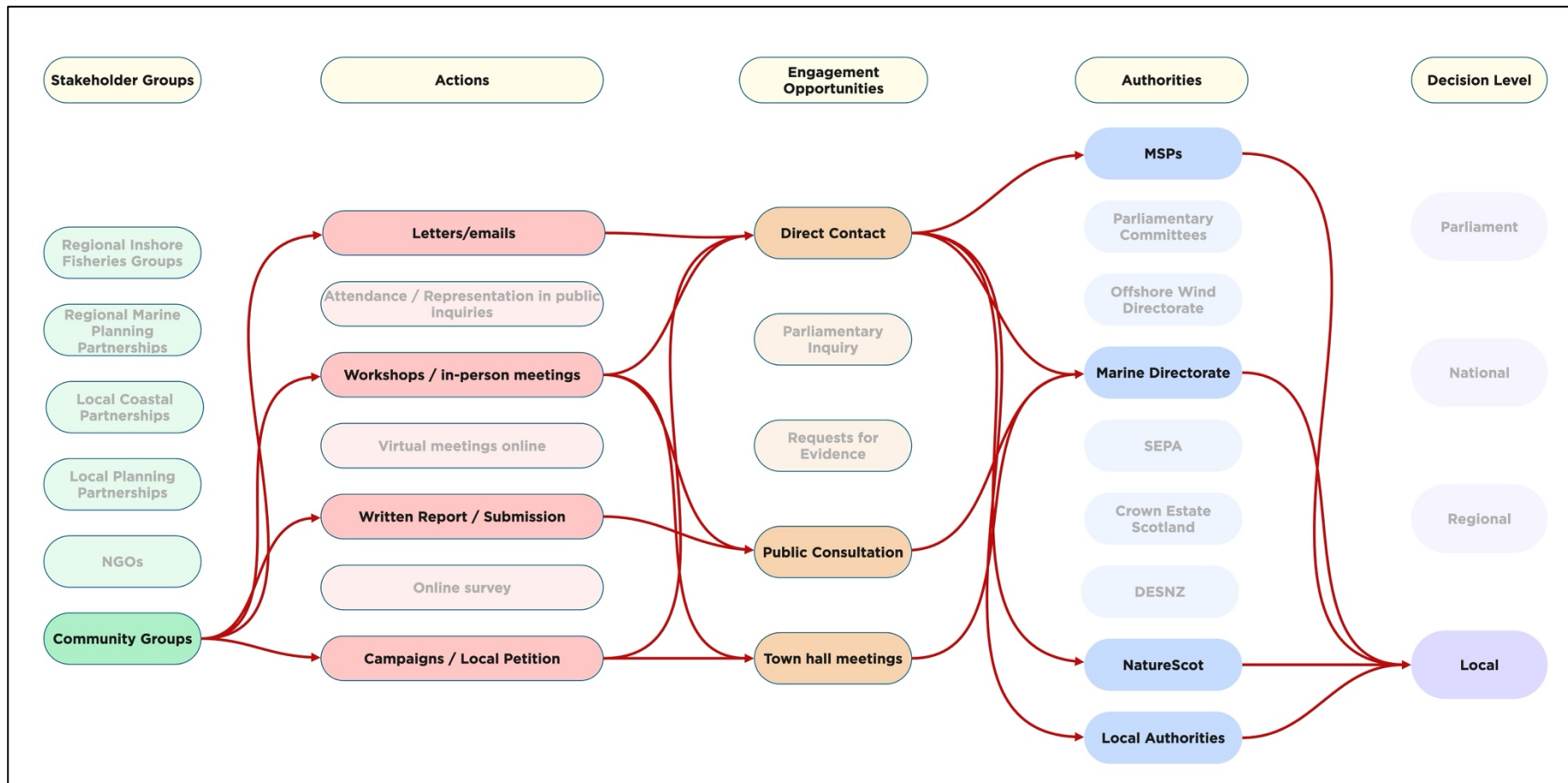
Figure 6: The engagement pathway for the implementation of the Lamlash Bay No Take Zone (NTZ). This initiative was led by members of the Arran community, who later established the Community of Arran Seabed Trust (COAST) community group. It included a range of engagement actions to linked to several different engagement opportunities that involved different authorities. The initiative focused on influencing management decisions of how the local area of Lamlash Bay was used (i.e., the designation of the NTZ).

4.3   Case Study 3: Crown Estate Scotland Local Management Pilots

In 2018, the Crown Estate Scotland (CES) launched the local management pilot scheme with the intention in increasing the involvement of Scotland's communities in the management of land and property in their vicinity. Through this approach, CES aim to democratise their assets and enable the incorporation of local knowledge and expertise to manage local resources.

This approach highlights a collaborative approach to asset management, where the CES can form partnerships with bodies representing local communities, e.g., local authorities and development Trusts. Through this novel approach to managing assets, communities are more directly involved in the decisions on how CES's assets (i.e., land, foreshore, and sea) are made, which, in turn, empowers communities.

The process for identifying potential pilot projects included engagement and consultation with community organisations, local authorities and other groups to assist with designing the scheme, application process, and criteria for assessing applications. In total, 13 applications were received, and the following were agreed following a decision by the CES Board:

- Comhairle nan Eilean Siar and Urras Oighreachd Ghabhsainn
- Forth District Salmon Fishery Board
- Orkney Islands Council
- Shetland Islands Council

To date, only two of the above projects have completed agreements: The Forth District Salmon Fisheries Board signed an agreement which enabled the board to handle lease agreements and other related consents in its district (pilot finished in April 2024), and Orkney Island Council signed an agreement which involved the local community in managing the seabed around Orkney (pilot finished in August 2024).

As part of the Orkney pilot, a Marine Asset Management Pilot Officer was recruited in 2021 to explore existing and potential processes for local involvement in future seabed and foreshore property rights applications. Additionally, the pilot supported opportunities to, for example:

- Practice early engagement with marine developers,
- Knowledge-share between agencies, internal and external stakeholders,
- Develop transparency in seabed leasing practices, and
- examine opportunities and gaps between national and local authorities' decision making.

The Orkney pilot highlighted a number of benefits and, following its conclusion in 2024, CES agreed to extend funding to progress the Pilot's success and foster new mandates that address climate change, blue economy, and other national objectives for sustainable management of regional seas. It was, however, also recommended that the delegation to manage the leasing and licensing of seabed assets should not take place due to the considerable costs of specialist services required for a relatively low number of development projects.

The Local Management Pilot Scheme run by CES represents a high level of community engagement, collaboration, and involvement in the management of CES assets with the

intention of providing benefit to local communities. The call for proposals on how to co-manage CES assets enabled novel approaches to community engagement and empowerment to be developed and trialled. In 2021, CES published a [Lessons Learned report](#), which highlighted how the approach significantly increased the involvement of local communities in the management of CES assets, a greater understanding of the risks and opportunities for communities in managing the Estate, and a positive shift in the relationship between local partners and CES. This has led to CES taking a more open approach to local involvement and a greater desire for partnership working.

In contrast to the Lamlash NTZ engagement pathway (Figure 6), the CES Local Management Pilot Scheme pathway (Figure 7) demonstrates a simple, linear approach led by CES where a single engagement opportunity (i.e., call for evidence/applications to the scheme) was publicised. Figure 6 shows the pathway taken by Orkney Islands Council, who were the lead organisation in the Orkney Marine Planning Partnership responsible for developing Orkney's RMP. The partnership between CES and Orkney Islands Council led to a joint approach to managing the seabed around Orkney at both the local and regional scale.
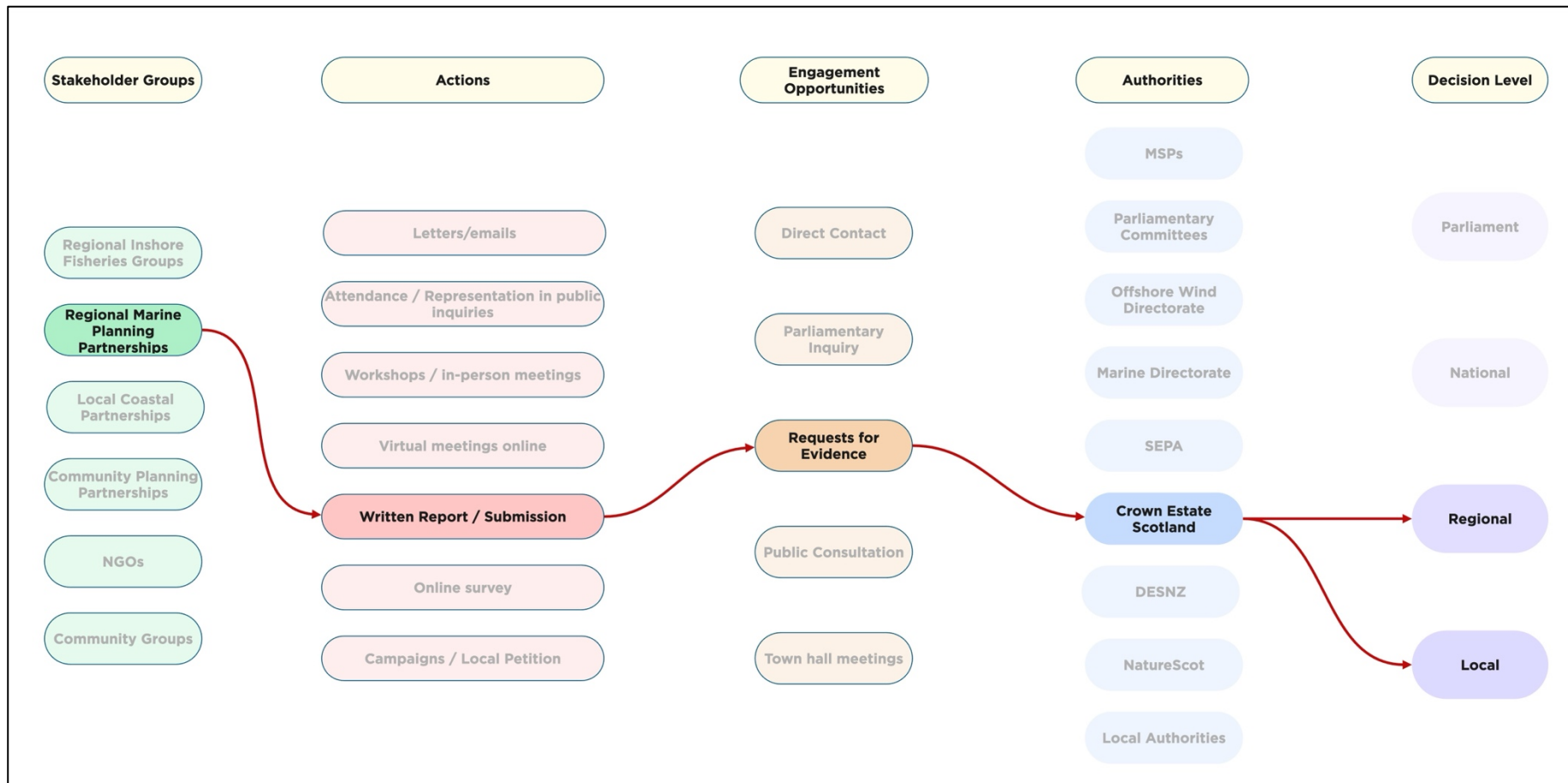
Figure 7: The engagement pathway for Crown Estate Scotland's (CES) Local Management Pilot Scheme. This was a CES-led initiative that involved a call for applications to the scheme, which was open to all stakeholder groups to apply to. The example pathway provided in the diagram is for Orkney Island's Council (also the lead organisation for the Orkney Regional Marine Planning Partnership) who submitted a successful application to CES for the shared management of the seabed surrounding Orkney.

The three case studies demonstrate some of the different ways in which communities have been able to provide input into the management and use of Scotland's marine environment, either through a stakeholder-led approach (Lamlash Bay and Oceans of Value) or through engaging with authority-led opportunities (CES Local Management Pilot Scheme). While these three approaches are different and have required varying levels or resources, they were all ultimately successful in achieving their objectives.

The system maps provide a high-level overview of the different ways stakeholder groups can engage with the decision-making process, which can be highly variable depending on the party initiating engagement (i.e., stakeholder group or authority), the decision level (e.g., national, local), or the purpose of the engagement activity (e.g., CES pilot scheme vs designation of an NTZ). Typically, authority-led initiatives are simpler and more streamlined, and are designed in a more targeted and strategic way. The Oceans of Value example, however, represents a relatively simple and targeted approach due to the intention of engaging with an existing process: the development of the Orkney RMP. The Lamlash Bay NTZ example, however, demonstrates a more complex and diverse route to engagement due to the ground-up nature of the activity that wasn't targeting an already-established process. Without a clear opportunity for engagement, COAST was required to pursue multiple approaches in the hope that at least one would be successful.

5   Engagement approaches

Progress is being made in relation to enhancing engagement approaches in the UK, in response to increasing provisions and focus. A wide range of techniques are available including more traditional approaches such as interviews, focus groups, questionnaire/surveys, town meetings, workshops, etc., and more novel approaches including CVM and arts-based methods such as forum theatre are being applied to support engagement and conflict resolution. Key considerations in determining which approach is appropriate include the resources available, accessibility and suitability to the purpose of the engagement.

Different techniques serve different purposes and require different levels of resource to be conducted effectively. Approaches to categorising engagement is helpful, such as the EU Inter Ventures project (Table 1) showing light-touch, low resource 'monitor' approaches up to the more intensive and high-resource engagement to 'innovate'. These move from one-way transmission of information such as through marketing campaigns and social media outreach, to more in-depth collaboration which incorporates input from stakeholders through workshops, joint research or the use of advisory councils.

Table 1: Description and costs of different approaches to stakeholder engagement identified as part of the EU Inter Ventures project

Engagement Approach	Overview	Example	Resources
Monitor	Tracking or monitoring stakeholder positions via research or discussion with other parties.	Tracking the issues of greatest concern of selected stakeholder groups	£
Message	Adapting communications scope and messaging to meet Stakeholder expectations	Creating and targeting messages to specific stakeholders	£
Advocate	Activities to enlist support for a specific effort or position that may have opposition or reflect an actual or perceived imbalance of power	Clarification of a position of Project Partner in response to stakeholder criticism	££
Consult	Soliciting explicit feedback or input on a project. Implies an expectation by the stakeholders that the Project Partner will make concrete changes based on the consultation	Consultation with a stakeholder advisory board on policy or process changes regarding the projects approach to a particular issue	£££
Collaborate	Initiating or participating in two-way dialogue focused on mutual learning and solutions. Can include co-creation of new ideas and approaches	Consultation with local community and political groups to determine the most mutually beneficial options	££££
Innovate	Shared work on common objectives of the project and its stakeholder. Can include co-creation, as well as co-implementation of new ideas	Launch of a new product or service in partnership with expert stakeholders	£££££

Key considerations when designing engagement processes (adapted from EU Inter Ventures Community Engagement Methodology) include:

- Familiarity: How well do you know the issue and the stakeholder(s) involved? What research, dialogue, and pre-work has been done already?
- Frequency: Is this one meeting, multiple meetings, or an ongoing dialogue with no defined end?

- Guidance/facilitation: Will the engagement be managed directly by the decision maker or will it be facilitated by a third party?
- Trust/credibility: How much trust exists between the event organiser and the attending stakeholders?
- Participant profile: Does the engagement involve a single representative, many from the same stakeholder group, or representatives from across many different groups?
- Complexity: Does the engagement involve one issue or multiple issues?

A report by Natural England on embedding an evidence-led, best-practice culture of engagement identified the following additional points to consider:

- The relevance of local context and how this may influence effective engagement
- The importance of engaging stakeholders in dialogue as early as possible in the decision-making process.

When exploring the potential for transdisciplinary approaches to enhance engagement activity, the Diverse Marine Values Project identified that, while progress is being made to better integrate social values into marine decision-making, there are concerns regarding resources available within government and the rapid pace of decision-making. Therefore, focusing on efficiency and effectiveness in engagement is critical. Designing, delivering and handling engagement also requires capacity and capability in social research which is lacking, or poorly integrated across government departments. Key opportunities and potential actions were highlighted, including:

- **Co-define approaches to cross-cutting social policy objectives** – recognising the cross-cutting policy drivers with social outcomes, there is an opportunity to work with stakeholders and communities to develop a shared understanding of concepts such as wellbeing and ways to enhance them.
- **Work with 3rd sector organisations to augment social research capability in marine management institutions** and support better integration between departments addressing community engagement across government, to maximise resources.
- **Define a framework for participation in marine decision-making** – setting out the role of key related processes such as marine planning, sectoral planning, Strategic Environmental Assessment (SEA), Environmental Impact Assessment (EIA) and improve integration and show how information is used between them, supporting efficiency and consistency. Inclusion of 'process literacy' in the development of ocean literacy, as suggested in Mckinley & Fradera (2025), is recommended.
- **Focus on integration of local and national governance** by taking steps to reinvigorate the nested system of social representation across scales, with more collaboration between national marine managers and other bodies which seek to represent communities, such as Local Authorities, local councils, and town / community councils.
- **Explore wider approaches to enhancing democracy and public participation** such as citizen assemblies and deliberative democracy, and how these approaches could better elicit broad social values for decision-making.
- **Enhance engagement** - when planning and undertaking engagement, consultation processes could be more accessible in some cases, including with concise summary

documents for all stakeholder groups to ensure they can engage with the consultation process more efficiently, and with a contact to support with queries. Providing feedback following engagement to demonstrate acknowledgement would ensure that views are considered, avoid frustration and encourage engagement in future processes. Greater use of organisations, groups and networks, including 3rd sector and volunteer organisations, would also be helpful.

- **Take a learning-based approach to new methods** - **creative engagement methods** can be used to explore particular issues and elicit perspectives in different decision-making contexts. Demonstrating their cost-effectiveness and value for money through piloting would support uptake. This requires a clear articulation of objectives and a framework for evaluating success, enabling new methods to be embedded and adapted based on what is learned.

The MMO's '[Exploring the challenges, opportunities and barriers to local decision making](#)' report presents an initial step in exploring a nested, multi-level marine planning approach in England, aimed at enhancing equitable outcomes through more inclusive and participatory decision-making. Key findings adapted for relevance in this context include:

- There are challenges due to integration between marine, coastal and terrestrial decision-making frameworks which are overlapping and require co-ordination and clarity / simplification for stakeholders.
- Importance of scale – matching the engagement to the issue being discussed is complicated and requires multiple options / pathways (see above). The hierarchies of policy and decision-making needs to be clear and communicated, with the anticipated influence of any local engagement in this context made clear.
- It is important to acknowledge that issues beyond the scope of the particular engagement are likely to arise, and if not addressed in that specific process, need to be clearly signposted so that issues of importance to people are addressed.
- Pursuing localised decision-making depends on the integration across levels to ensure co-ordination, effective use of resources and support learning. The RMP process in Scotland is an example where this vertical integration still has not been fully determined with a lack of clarity over how regional and national marine planning interrelates.
- Further, marine planning needs to be shown to steer other decision-making such as marine licensing, so that engagement is seen as influential and worthwhile. Marine plan policy and influence can be weak where policy is ambiguous or vague, which can often be the case. This includes steering decision making around competing uses for space, how and why certain uses are prioritised, and how prioritisation decisions are made.
- Local / community engagement is being promoted across potentially overlapping processes, such as RIFGs to support co-management in fisheries, marine planning, MPA management etc., and understanding this overlap could support alignment and shared use of resources.
- 3rd party organisations are critical for engaging with communities and there is potential for closer co-operation with existing groups such as Coastal Communities Network,

Coastal Partnerships, Solway Firth Partnership and to explore how to support capacity sharing between them.

- Exploring sustainable financing mechanisms with Local Authorities and other groups such as 'place-based trusts' or governance models which act as funding aggregation vehicles could bring in private investment and diversify the range of funding sources available for a region's environmental priorities with community involvement.
- Internal (within government) collaboration and co-ordination across teams and functions could better inform activities, developments, and planning decisions at a local level, bringing in various expertise/data where relevant
- Awareness raising and promotion of opportunities to engage such as in marine planning and other processes is key.
- There could be opportunities for promoting a natural capital or multiple capital approach as a mechanism for collating evidence, understanding value and assessing trade-offs, 'to inform decision making.

6   Summary of findings and opportunities

This section provides a summary of findings and potential opportunities for LINK to consider in developing their advocacy on community engagement in marine planning decision making.

Clarify and enhance the role of regional marine planning

The findings from this study highlight the importance and value of engaging with and empowering local communities and stakeholders to influence decision on their local environment, in particular through nested approaches to decision making. A clear route for achieving this for Scotland's coastal communities and marine environment is the development and adoption of RMPs. The National Marine Plan has the potential to provide high level objectives on stakeholder and community engagement, but regional marine plans enable stakeholder and community engagement to be designed and delivered at a regional scale, enabling a more targeted and effective approach to engagement.

Review the current status of stakeholder engagement in Scotland in relation to provisions

As this report highlights, the provisions for stakeholder engagement in Scotland are numerous and, while it appears the legislation and frameworks are in place, it is not clear how well they have been implemented. A monitoring, evaluation, and learning (MEL) assessment could provide insights on progress in delivering against certain provisions and present an opportunity for the Scottish Government to publicise progress made and actions made to improve stakeholder engagement.

An assessment of stakeholder engagement in Scotland, particularly covering the period since the adoption of the Community Empowerment Act, could provide valuable insights on where we are in delivering community engagement in Scotland. Such an assessment could be conducted internally by the Scottish Government, by an independent 3rd party or through a Parliamentary review.

Defining a framework for community engagement in a marine decision-making

There are a significant, and growing, number of provisions addressing engagement and participation, as well as increasing emphasis on social outcomes in policy, such as in relation to wellbeing and inclusivity. However, community and stakeholder engagement in Scotland is currently delivered through a fragmented approach, made up of multiple pieces of legislation and plans that involve multiple decision makers, asset owners, and marine sectors. This creates an inefficient approach to engagement.

To address the above inefficiencies and better coordinate and align stakeholder engagement in Scotland, the Scottish Government could develop a cross-cutting framework that sets out a long-term vision, legislative provisions, and a co-developed strategy for stakeholder engagement and community empowerment. This approach could support greater cross-government working to achieve shared outcomes in a more efficient way. Such a framework was recently proposed by the UK Environmental Audit Committee and could potentially link to the Scottish Government's reform of the National Performance Framework.

Build on the approaches being taken forward to enhance local governance in Scotland

The Scottish Government's Local Governance Review with COSLA provides valuable insights into how diverse communities can have greater control and influence over local decisions. The resulting Democracy Matters Phase 2 Report provides a valuable resource of key findings from the discussions and consultations on community engagement in decision making. The resulting Local Governance Review Joint Statement, published in 2024, proposes the establishment of a cross-sector Democracy Matters steering group, made up of Local Governments, community leaders, and democratic innovators, which will develop "ambitious decision-making systems and processes and consider how these can be tested on the ground with local people". The Scottish Government is working towards an implementation phase early in the next Parliament.

These trials could support closer join up between the Scottish Government and Local Government in decision making and ensuring coastal constituencies are included in the trials would be important for incorporating the marine environment and coastal communities into decision making.

Improve the design of engagement in marine decision-making

The Scottish Government has the legislation, policies, and plans in place to guide effective stakeholder engagement, which is demonstrated by the NMP2 consultation process, but questions remain over the effectiveness of engagement. By engaging early with the Scottish Government, prior to consultation taking place, LINK could help inform the design of the stakeholder engagement process to ensure that the Government's own guidance is adhered to. Further, using the observations set out in this report, LINK could support the design of effective engagement activities. For example, the system map approach can support a strategic approach to engagement across stakeholders, enabling the most effective/meaningful pathway for engagement to be identified.

Next steps for the CES pilot

The CES asset management pilot proved to be successful and represents an important example of a proactive and pragmatic approach to devolving management responsibilities to the local level. However, it is unclear what role CES can play going forward or what CES's

plans are for the scheme. Clarity over CES's findings and learnings from the pilot scheme could help with developing a co-created approach to identifying future opportunities for shared management of CES assets. More broadly, The Crown Estate (TCE) are developing approaches to better understand social 'value' in their planning, moving beyond financial revenue to a more detailed understanding of what 'prosperity' means for communities and how they might benefit from TCE's activities. Although focussed on England, Wales and Northern Ireland, TCE are exploring the application of their planning tool (the 'Whole of Seabed Programme[5]') in Scotland, with CES, and there may be opportunity to collaborate with them and inform the development of this approach.

Community engagement in marine nature restoration initiatives

The Scottish Marine Environmental Enhancement Fund (SMEEF) provides opportunities for community members and local groups to get funding to support marine restoration activities. However, the projects that have received funding have tended to focus on small-scale, individual projects. Through the development and adoption of RMPs, there is potential for a more strategic approach to marine restoration that prioritises local community interests, which could be supported through SMEEF. This approach could also incorporate community/societal impact and explore opportunities to deliver social as well as nature outcomes. Further, the establishment of place-based trusts could support sustainable financing for continued environmental enhancement.

Enhancement of capacity building and support for engagement

Capacity within the Scottish Government a key limiting factor to effective engagement and, as such, engagement can feel inadequate and like a tick-box exercise. While calling for more resources may address this, there are other opportunities to build capacity, such as sharing learnings from community groups, improve collaboration with 3rd sector organisations to raise awareness, share information, and support engagement, and improve understanding of cross-policy drivers (i.e., non-marine and marine) for more efficient use of resources, including analytical capability.

Improve awareness raising of opportunities to engage

The findings in this report highlight the various approaches to stakeholder engagement and emphasises the importance of sharing information prior to engagement events (e.g., workshops or consultations) to ensure all stakeholders and members of the public are well-informed, understand the purpose of engagement, what the governments expectations are, and how the information collected will be used to inform decisions. While the Scottish Government has taken steps to achieve this (e.g., publishing the NMP2 Stakeholder Engagement Strategy), it is not clear how effective it has been in raising awareness. Therefore, there is potential for community groups and other organisations (e.g., NGOs) to work more strategically with the Scottish Government to ensure the right information is made available and shared through appropriate channels to increase the level of engagement.

Incorporate natural capital approaches to support dialogue decision-making

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[5] https://www.thecrownestate.co.uk/our-business/marine/marine-overview

The Oceans of Value project highlights the role natural capital assessments can play in highlighting how a healthy marine environment can provide benefits to society. By incorporating natural capital approaches into marine planning, wider societal benefits and impacts can be identified and shared with stakeholders and communities, leading to more informed decision making. The Crown Estate in England have developed thinking on how to consider social value in decision making, and there is potential to engage with CES to consider natural capital in a possible next phase of their asset management pilot scheme.

Promote the development of a Scottish Ocean Literacy strategy

The development of a Scottish ocean literacy strategy (such as the Ocean Literacy Strategy for Wales) would help inform the Scottish public on the importance of the marine environment, the benefits it provides, and how human activities influence its health. This information will help create a more informed public and result in more meaningful and impactful engagement and input into decision making. The Marine Conservation Society's HYMN project provides a good example of to engage with the public to increase ocean literacy and help inform the sustainable management of local marine heritage and promote health and wellbeing.

Incorporated into an ocean literacy strategy should be 'process' literacy to ensure those engaging in marine planning decisions understanding how marine planning decisions are made and how their input is used to inform those decisions. Understanding of the marine planning process will help manage stakeholder expectations and build transparency in the decision-making process.

7   Conclusion

The information provided in this report provides a basis for understanding how stakeholder and community engagement could be supported in Scotland, reflecting on current strengths , weaknesses and opportunities. It highlights how the requirement for stakeholder engagement and community empowerment in marine decision making is grounded in several pieces of Scottish legislation and multiple frameworks and plans developed by the Scottish Government. However, despite the adoption of these legislative tools, frameworks, and plans, more could be done to support effective community engagement in Scotland in a strategic and co-ordinated way. While there is sufficient guidance for developing engagement strategies and identifying key stakeholders to engage with, the methods available for stakeholders to engage with decision makers are highly varied, requiring different levels of resource and participation, and conducted for differing purposes, as highlighted by the case studies. Stakeholder and community engagement is further complicated by the fragmented approach to decision making that exists in Scotland.

There are, however, several activities taking place in Scotland that aim to address these challenges and progress is being made, including through the NMP2 process. Based on the analysis in this report, a number of opportunities are identified to support LINK in taking forward action and advocacy to enhance stakeholder engagement, focussing on developing a more coordinated and co-developed approach to stakeholder and community engagement to enhance empowerment in decision making. Understanding the current status of stakeholder

and community engagement in Scotland will be essential for identifying and refining opportunities for improvement and increasing engagement in the decision-making process.