



Llywodraeth Cymru
Welsh Government



Marine
Management
Organisation



The Severn Estuary: A cross-border marine planning guide

July 2023



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1. Introduction

This document provides an overview of marine planning policies and related considerations relevant to the Severn Estuary. It does not introduce new statutory planning policy or regulatory responsibilities on marine sectors or decision-makers or provide advice on how to apply for consents.

This document has been produced jointly by Welsh Government and the Marine Management Organisation (MMO). Its aim is to aid in the implementation of marine planning policy and provide additional clarity to marine users on management and governance processes in the Severn Estuary. The Severn Estuary is located at the intersection of the English and Welsh marine planning regimes.

1.1 Policy context

Marine planning in the United Kingdom (UK) is governed by the **Marine and Coastal Access Act** (the Act) which makes provision for the preparation of marine plans and places responsibilities on decisions in regard to and accordance with, those plans. The **UK Marine Policy Statement (MPS)** provides a framework for preparing marine plans and the high-level planning policy context which guides national (and sub-national) marine planning. It also sets out the vision for the UK marine area as a whole for 'clean, healthy, safe, productive and biologically diverse oceans and seas'.

For the purposes of this document, the Severn Estuary is considered as the whole area from its seaward extent (Brean Down to Lavernock Point in Wales through Flat Holm Island) to its furthest tidal extent. This area is shown in Figure 3.

The lower half of the estuary falls within the South West Marine Plan area (Figure 1) of the English marine plans and the upper half falls within the Welsh National Marine Plan area (Figure 2). The Severn estuary ecosystem encompasses both the Welsh and English marine plan areas and beyond.

This document sits alongside other non-statutory plan related policy, guidance, and evidence to support marine planning in England and Wales. It should be read as supplementary to and in conjunction with the **Welsh National Marine Plan**, and the **South West Marine Plan**.

The Act states that “*a marine plan authority must take all reasonable steps to secure that [its] plan is compatible with the marine plan for any [other] marine plan area*” as well as any relevant terrestrial plan. The MPS builds on this requirement and sets out that the planning authorities are committed to “*the co-ordination of marine planning across administrative boundaries*” which includes “*planning for activities which extend across national or Marine Plan area boundaries*”.

The Welsh National Marine Plan was adopted by Welsh Ministers on 12 November 2019. The South West Marine Plan was adopted by Secretary of State for Environment, Food and Rural Affairs on 23 June 2021. For the Welsh marine area, the Welsh National Marine Plan includes a plan area vision and objectives that supports the UK vision and High Level Marine Objectives, as set out in the MPS. In England, the approach is slightly different where by the UK vision and High

Level Marine Objectives are included in the South West Marine Plan and the south west marine plan areas will contribute to achieving this UK vision, supported by a specific south west marine plan vision. The vision for the south west marine plan areas reflects the challenges and opportunities that exist in the plan areas and was developed through stakeholder engagement, taking account of the approach to drafting plans, national policy and the evidence base."

Figure 1: England South West Marine Plan Area

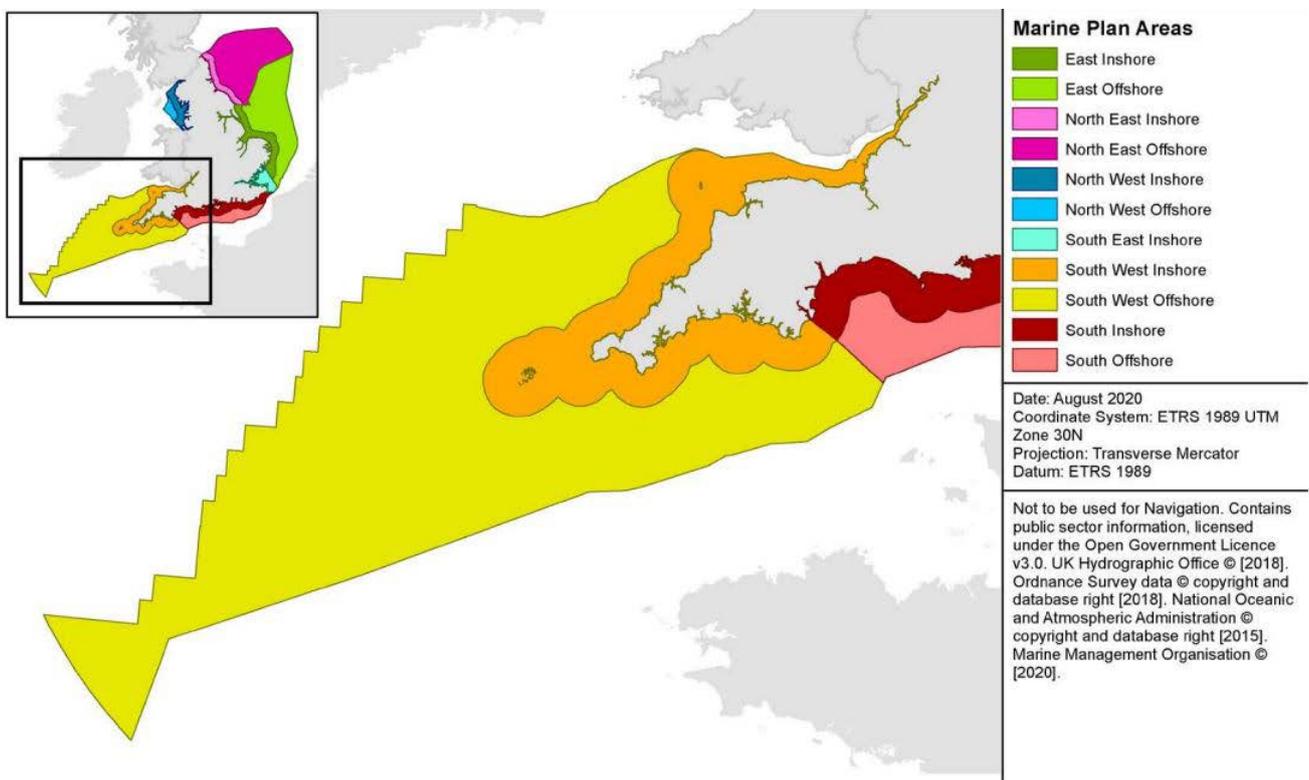
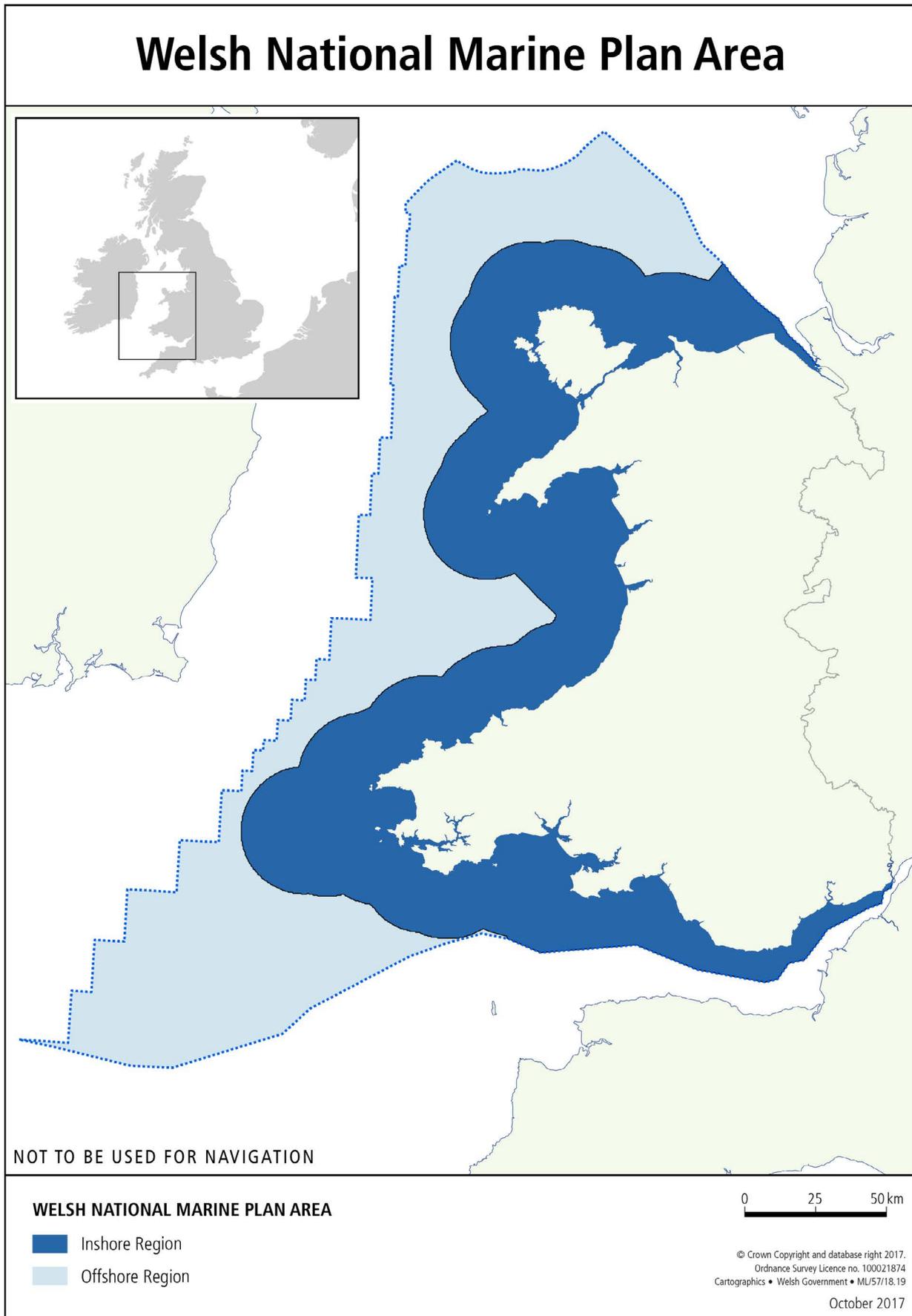


Figure 2: Welsh National Marine Plan Area



2. Marine planning in an estuary context

2.1 Cross-border policies

The Welsh National Marine Plan and South West Marine Plan both include specific policies on cross-border cooperation and plan compatibility. These policies set the context and requirements of cross-border working and decision-making.

As well as the specific cross-border policies, there are other marine plan policies that have cross-border relevance. For example, often activities take place across marine plan area boundaries. Also, impacts of an activity can extend over a wider footprint than the activity itself such as the impacts of dredging or large-scale

infrastructure or because of the transboundary nature of ecosystem features, such as marine mammals.

Regular engagement and the sharing of evidence and data between jurisdictions is an important aspect of cross-border compatibility. Welsh Government and the MMO are committed to joint working particularly with respect to planning for cross border areas. To facilitate understanding of the plan areas, natural resources and human uses alongside planning policy, both parties maintain and regularly update online portals – the [Wales Marine Planning Portal](#) and [Explore Marine Plans](#) with relevant marine spatial data.

2.2 Implementation and decision-making

Decisions in the Severn Estuary, that have the potential to affect the marine area should be made in accordance with or regard to with the Welsh National Marine Plan and South West Marine Plan, and all adjacent statutory plans, both marine and terrestrial, to ensure activities and development within an area support Governments objectives for the plan area and do not, directly or indirectly, cause significant adverse impacts.

Both the Welsh National Marine Plan and South West Marine Plan include policies requiring that relevant public authorities, in making their decisions should have regard to key documents in order to ensure adequate integration with other planning regimes. Importantly, where a decision has the potential to impact Welsh interests, decisions should take into account Welsh policy priorities and legislative requirements. Likewise, where a decision has the potential to impact

English interests, decisions should take into account English policy priorities and legislative requirements.

The different policies from the bordering Plans are the basis for decision makers to decide on a proposal on a case-by-case basis and would typically be driven by considerations such as location, extent and nature of likely effects, relevant plan policies and other matters.

Proposals should provide evidence of appropriate consideration and compatibility with relevant statutory plans and any relevant related supplementary material. This will support the decision maker in understanding how the proposal has taken account of and is compatible with relevant plan policy. As set out in the Plans, they should demonstrate consideration of any relevant cross-border impacts including any likely positive or adverse economic, social, and environmental impacts, and address adverse

impacts in line with the applicable marine plan policy. Proponents should provide evidence to the relevant decision maker of any consultations conducted with relevant stakeholders including sectors and public authorities. This is particularly important with respect to trans-boundary applications where several plans are likely to be relevant and there are likely to be a wide range of interested parties.

On receipt of an application for an authorisation, it is the responsibility of the determining public authority to notify other relevant public authorities or wider stakeholder, as appropriate, that may wish to make representations. Developers are encouraged to notify all relevant public authorities (including in any neighbouring administration) prior to submitting an application. Public authorities should liaise with and/or consult any other relevant decision-making authorities, statutory advisors, or other bodies as appropriate with a view to co-ordinating activity and aligning processes and decision making where possible.

In addition to marine and terrestrial planning policies and legislation, proponents of projects and decision-makers will also need to consider and have regard to a wider policy context.

This includes relevant legislation such as:

- **The Wildlife and Countryside Act 1981.**
- **The Planning Act 2008.**
- **The Well-being of Future Generations (Wales) Act 2015.**
- **The Planning (Wales) Act 2015.**
- **The Environment (Wales) Act 2016.**
- **The Water Environment (Water Framework Directive) (England and Wales) Regulations 2017.**
- **The Conservation of Habitats and Species (EU Exit) Regulations 2019.**
- **The Environment Act 2021.**

It also includes relevant statutory and non-statutory plans and national policies such as:

- **Area Statements**
- **Environmental Improvement Plans**
- **Flood Risk Management Plans**
- **River Basin Management Plans**
- **Shoreline Management Plans**

It is recognised that any Nationally Significant Infrastructure Project could present substantial opportunities to transform local communities, the economy, and the environment.

Nationally Significant Infrastructure Project proposals are encouraged to avoid, minimise or mitigate adverse impacts commonly associated with the construction, operation and decommissioning phases of major infrastructure projects.

Nationally Significant Infrastructure Projects within Wales and England are decided on by the Secretary of State, and as such Welsh Ministers and Statutory Nature Conservation Bodies will feed into the process and ensure that both Welsh and English interests are made clear. With regards to projects in Wales, and projects that may affect Wales, they should seek to deliver lasting legacy benefits for the local community, the economy and the environment, as set out in the Welsh National Marine Plan in line with the Wellbeing of Future Generations (Wales) Act and the Environment Act (Wales). The Welsh National Marine Plan sets out the ambitions for these lasting legacies, (Box 1).

- Supporting the sustainability, vibrancy and quality of life of coastal communities;
- Conserving and enhancing the cultural heritage of Wales' coastal communities and promoting the Welsh language;
- Providing infrastructure, housing, facilities and services necessary to support development which is accessible to host communities and offers a legacy use;
- Contributing to long term sustainable economic development and local prosperity by creating high quality, local employment opportunities, taking into account the likely requirements for training, and working with national and government training organisations;
- Delivering necessary transport infrastructure and promoting sustainable modes of transport that provide enduring low carbon connectivity and a legacy benefit;
- Contributing to the transition towards the achievement of low carbon, sustainable economic development, minimising carbon emissions and increasing the resilience of people, places and the environment to the effects of climate change; and
- Contributing to the conservation and enhancement of biodiversity and ecosystem resilience.

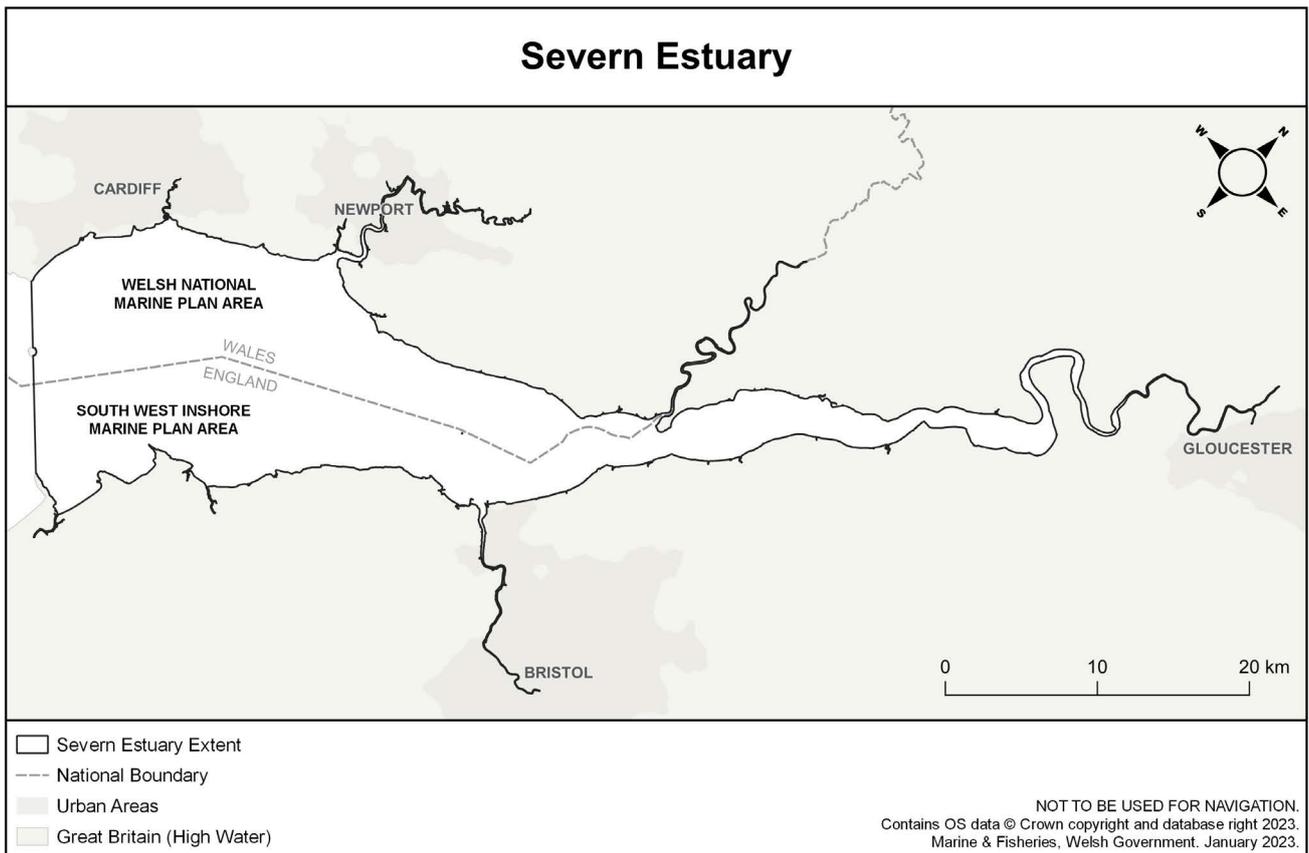
More information on the process for preparing and submitting proposals and implementation of marine planning policy is provided in the [South West Marine Plan Technical Annex](#) and the [Welsh National Marine Plan Implementation Guidance](#).

3. The Severn Estuary

The estuary catchment area is home to over one million people including the major cities of Bristol, Cardiff, and Newport.¹ The marine and terrestrial environment of the estuary plays an important role in supporting the lives and livelihoods of residents and visitors through the provision of tangible benefits like water, food, transportation, trade, and building materials. It also provides less tangible but critically important benefits as services such as climate regulation and carbon sequestration as well as health and well-being benefits.

The unique shape of the Severn Estuary results in it having the largest tidal range in the UK and the second largest in the world. This creates one of the largest intertidal zones in the UK characterised by extensive sand and mudflats. This habitat is home to significant populations of migratory and wintering birds and their prey.

Figure 3: Severn Estuary defined extent and marine plan areas



1 Human Environment – Severn Estuary Partnership

The estuary has a rich cultural heritage and is home to a large concentration of well-preserved coastal archaeological features arising from historical human settlement over thousands of years. Tourism in the estuary is significant and rising, with approximately 50 million visitors per year.² Marine recreation in the estuary is also significant, with a focus predominantly on sailing, angling, ecotourism and surfing (The Severn Bore).

3.1 Governance considerations

The authorities responsible for marine planning related decision-making within the Severn Estuary area include:

- Environment Agency (England).
- Local Planning Authorities (England and Wales).
- Natural Resource Wales (Wales).
- Natural England (England).
- Planning Inspectorate (England).
- Port and Harbour Authorities (England and Wales).
- The Marine Management Organisation (England).
- UK Department for Business, Energy, and Industrial Strategy (England and retained functions for Wales).
- UK Department for Digital, Culture, Media, and Sport (England).
- UK Department for Environment, Food and Rural Affairs (England and retained functions for Wales).

The Severn Estuary is a busy area for marine development and activity including shipping, navigational dredging, disposal, construction, and fishing. The ports and shipping industry is a significant employer in the area with busy ports at Bristol, Cardiff and Newport. Severn Estuary ports cumulatively handle around 13 million tonnes of cargo and are used by over 3,500 vessels per year.³

- UK Ministry of Housing, Communities and Local Government (England).
- Welsh Government including Planning and Environment Decisions Wales (Wales).

The Severn Estuary benefits from the activity of the Severn Estuary Partnership, an independent, non-statutory initiative led by local authorities and statutory agencies, that works with stakeholders involved in the management of the estuary. The Severn Estuary Partnership aims to bring people together to resolve problems and realise opportunities for the estuary. This Partnership has published a **Severn Estuary Strategy** to champion an integrated approach to the sustainable use and enjoyment of the estuary and plays an important role in inputting to the marine planning process.

² [Britain's visitor economy facts | VisitBritain](#)

³ [Ports and Shipping – Severn Estuary Partnership](#) and [Port and domestic waterborne freight statistics: data tables \(PORT\)– GOV.UK \(www.gov.uk\)](#)

3.2 Environmental considerations

The Severn Estuary is host to a variety of habitats and species many of which protected through designation whilst other are not specifically protected but nevertheless are an important part of the ecosystem structure and function.

It has numerous protected sites falling in the National Site Network reflecting its important and diverse marine and coastal habitats, species, and geology. These include:

- Severn Estuary Special Area of Conservation.
- Severn Estuary Special Protection Area.
- Severn Estuary Ramsar.
- Somerset Levels and Moors Ramsar.
- Severn Estuary Site of Special Scientific Interest.
- Upper Severn Estuary Site of Special Scientific Interest.
- Bridgewater Bay Site of Special Scientific Interest.
- Sully Site of Special Scientific Interest.
- Flat Holm Site of Special Scientific Interest.
- Steep Holm Site of Special Scientific Interest.
- Newport Wetlands Site of Special Scientific Interest.
- Quantock Hills Area of Outstanding Natural Beauty.
- Wye Valley Area of Outstanding Natural Beauty.

Habitats are relatively immobile and effects on their structure, function and extent must be considered in all project proposals. Species are more mobile, with some covering large areas and can be more sensitive at certain times of year. For example, significant populations of sea birds occur throughout the estuary both in breeding colonies (year-round), for migration passage (Spring and Autumn) and overwintering populations (November to February). Fish spawning, and nursery grounds are important to maintain throughout the year but are considered most sensitive to impacts whilst hosting larval stages of fish species.

All project proposals need to demonstrate compliance with the relevant regional, national, and international regulation and legislation with regard to any sites protected for nature conservation interests. They should also be compatible with any relevant management measures which have been put in place for those sites.

Beyond protected site considerations, the biodiversity of the whole ecosystem is important to the processes and functioning

of the estuary and wider marine environment. Planning policy⁴ requires that proposals should assess the significance of any identified impacts on the wider marine ecosystem (including biodiversity that is not a feature of a current protected site), considering the Severn Estuary as one ecosystem. Proposals are also encouraged to contribute to an overall biodiversity gain, or some positive element of ecosystem restoration or enhancement, with the aim of leaving the environment in an improved state.⁵

Where an authorisation decision is taken that has the potential to impact upon Welsh marine ecosystems then as standard practice Natural Resources Wales as the Statutory Nature Conservation Body for the inshore (<12 nautical miles) will provide advice to the relevant decision maker. Likewise, in England, Natural England are the Statutory Nature Conservation Body for the inshore (<12 nautical miles) and will provide advice to the relevant decision maker. The Joint Nature Conservation Committee is the Statutory Nature Conservation Body for the offshore (>12 nautical miles) in both Welsh and English waters.

3.3 Economic considerations

A thriving marine economy is achieved and maintained, within a framework of sustainable development, by balancing the needs of the multitude of commercial marine activities that occur across the estuary area, such as fishing, aquaculture, port operations, tourism, and recreation alongside ensuring biodiversity is protected and enhanced. Optimising benefits from the management and sustainable use of natural resources requires an understanding

of their economic and societal value and the ways in which they provide a range of economic, social, environmental, and cultural benefits.

4 Policy ENV_01 'Resilient marine ecosystems' in Welsh National Marine Plan; Policy SW-BIO-1 'Biodiversity' in the South West Marine Plan.

5 Policy ENV_01 'Resilient marine ecosystems' in the Welsh National Marine Plan; Policy SW-BIO-3 'Biodiversity' in the South West Marine Plan. For additional information on biodiversity gain principles see the UK Government's [A Green Future: Our 25 Year Plan to Improve the Environment](#) and Natural Resources Wales Principles Supporting Restoration and Enhancement in Marine or Coastal Development Proposal.

Port and shipping activity⁶ is especially prevalent in the Severn Estuary with several large international ports such as Cardiff, Bristol, and Newport. These contribute to the growing UK shipping industry as well as supporting other regional industries such as fishing⁷, aggregate extraction⁸, and marine renewable energy^{9 10} activities. The Severn Estuary is home to many other marine activities including aquaculture¹¹, tourism, and recreation¹² (see Figure 4 for some existing sector activity within the Severn Estuary).

The Severn Estuary is an important area for aggregate extraction as it contains extensive areas of sandbanks of which some are dredged and the material used in construction, thus providing significant support for onshore industries.

The Severn Estuary is of relevance in terms of energy generation. The estuary hosts fossil fuel power stations, waste to energy power stations and nuclear power stations as well as renewable energy and energy from waste. There is recognition of the significant tidal resource which occurs in the estuary, the second largest in the world, with potential opportunities for generating energy from the tidal currents and tidal range.

Proposals for new development or activity within the estuary should consider the existence and location of established infrastructure and activity. The Welsh National Marine Plan and South West Marine Plan have sector policies for safeguarding existing facilities and infrastructure or a sectors' interests from adverse impacts¹³. Where possible, within a wider sustainability and environmental management framework, the Plans set out that marine developments should take place in or near to areas that can best support and/or benefit from that activity. This could mean that the physical infrastructure or skilled workforce is already available or potentially available for an activity, or that an area could support or benefit from an influx of development and employment.

Proposals should be economically sustainable, including value for money, benefits to society, support for the development of marine-related skills, in particular where they relate to the creation of marine jobs, and where they will benefit existing communities and future generations throughout the estuary catchment area.

6 Policy P&S_01 and P&S_02 'Ports and Shipping (Supporting)' in the Welsh National Marine Plan; Policy SW-PS-1-4 'Ports, harbours and shipping' in the South West Marine Plan.

7 Policy FIS_01 'Fishing (supporting)' in the Welsh National Marine Plan; Policy SW-FISH-1-3 'Fisheries' in the South West Marine Plan.

8 Policy Agg_01 'Aggregates (supporting)' in the Welsh National Marine Plan; Policy SW-AGG-1-3 'Aggregates' in the South West Marine Plan

9 Policy ELC_03 'Low carbon energy (supporting) tidal stream' in the Welsh National Marine Plan; Policy SW-REN-3 'Renewables' in the South West Marine Plan.

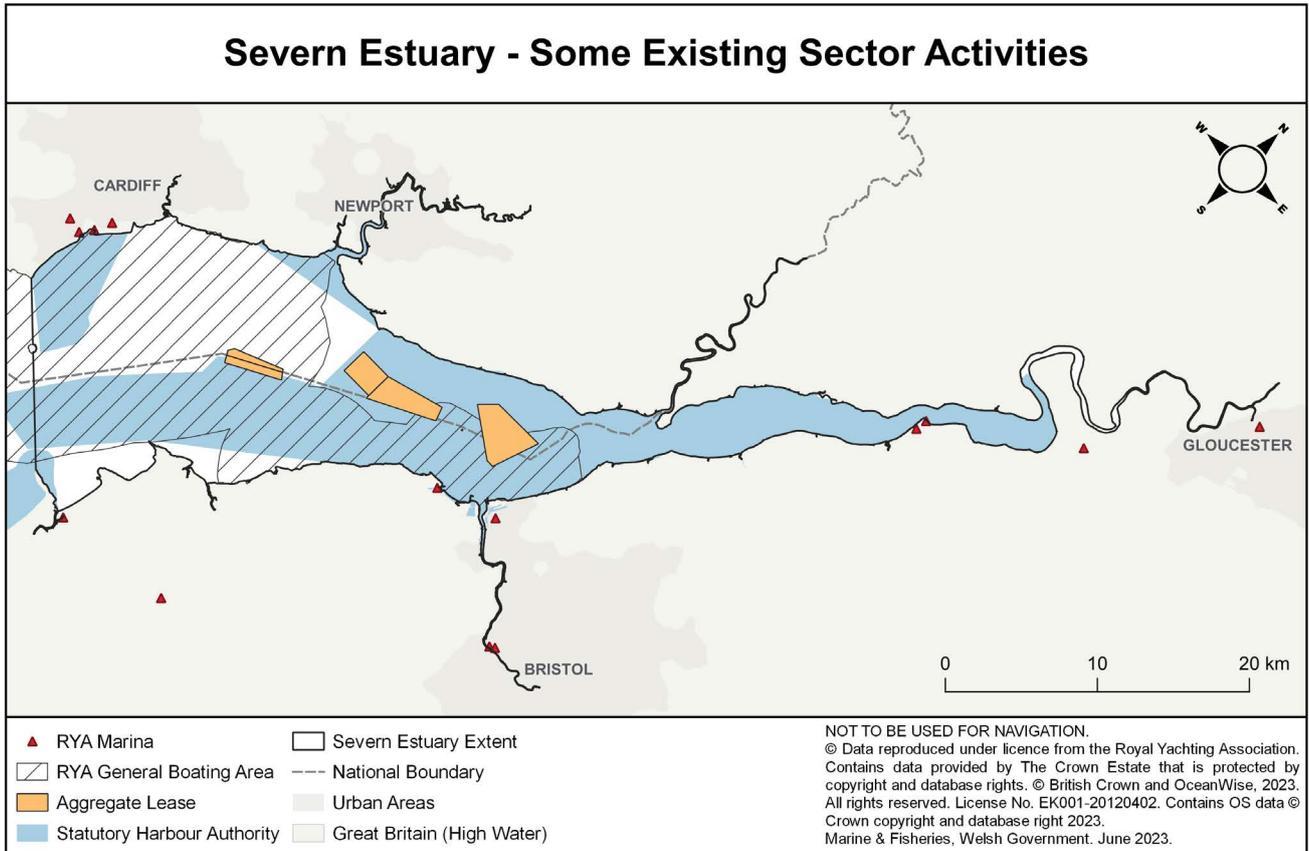
10 Policy ELC_04 'Low carbon energy (supporting) tidal range' in the Welsh National Marine Plan Policy SW-REN-3 'Renewables' in the South West Marine Plan.

11 Policy AQU_01 'Aquaculture (supporting)' in the Welsh National Marine Plan; Policy SW_AQ_1 and SW_AQ_2 'Aquaculture' in the South West Marine Plan.

12 Policy T&R_01 'Tourism and Recreation (supporting)' in the Welsh National Marine Plan; Policy SW-TR-1 'Tourism and recreation' in the South West Marine Plan.

13 Policy SAF_02 'Safeguarding strategic resources' in the Welsh National Marine Plan; Policy SW-INF-2 'Infrastructure' in the South West Marine Plan.

Figure 4: Some existing sector activity within the Severn Estuary



As the coastal and marine environment around the Severn Estuary becomes busier, the pressure on available space will increase and there will be a greater need for marine planning, helping marine users to share the same space and optimise the use of space. Co-existence (where multiple developments, activities or uses occur alongside or in close proximity to each other in the same area, or at the same time) can support the long-term sustainable management of the region by helping to ensure multiple benefits are secured thereby maximising the economic value of an area whilst minimising the distribution of impacts upon marine ecosystems.

Proposals should consider how they may affect current activities and optimise their use of space where possible. Co-existence or co-location of suitable activities is encouraged, where feasible, by both plans¹⁴. Where conflict over space or resource exists or arises, initiatives between sectors are encouraged. Early engagement between the respective sea users and, where relevant, other stakeholders and authorities is an important approach to explore opportunities for coexistence and should be progressed wherever practicable.

14 Policy ECON-02 'Coexistence' in Welsh National Marine Plan; Policy SW-CO-1 'Coexistence' in the South West Marine Plan.

3.4 Social considerations

The Severn Estuary is intrinsically linked to the local communities that surround it. It forms an important part of their history, culture, and their way of life. Many inhabitants living within the estuary catchment are employed within marine industries such as fishing, shipping, and ports, with many more working in supporting activities such as ship building, fish processing, construction, and tourism. For others, the estuary provides recreation, heritage, and contributes to well-being and a sense of place.

The estuary is also central to other important social issues within the region such as coastal change, flood risk, and climate change impacts. As national policies around decarbonisation, energy security, and climate change mitigation increasingly look to the UK's marine area, these aspects are likely to become even more significant within the Severn estuary region in the future.

Development and use of the estuary area has the potential to affect the socio-economic character and future prospects of its coastal communities as well as longer-lasting effects on future generations. Proposals need to consider any potential impacts across the estuary catchment area and should seek to ensure that opportunities are taken to contribute positively to the future well-being of coastal communities where possible. Proposals should consider the significance of potential development on relevant features of the area including cultural heritage, seascape, and environmental quality.

4. Conclusion

The Severn Estuary is an ecologically, economically, and socially important area that provides many services to the surrounding populations. The Severn Estuary falls within both the South West Inshore Marine plan area of the English marine plans and within the Welsh National Marine Plan area, as such, any proposals within the Severn Estuary should be in accordance with and in regard to both plans, as well as any other non-statutory plan related policy, guidance, and evidence to support marine planning in England and Wales. Where proposals straddle both plan areas, the relevant plan policies as appropriate should be applied subject to project specific considerations and early consultation with both regulators is encouraged.

Proposals should optimise the use of space and incorporate opportunities for co-existence and co-operation with existing activities. Any proposals that may have significant adverse impacts on or displace existing activities should follow guidance set out in relevant policies to ensure there are no significant adverse effects. This should include social economic and environmental consideration supporting long term strategies for sustainability for future generations.

The Welsh Government and Marine Management Organisation have a joint ambition for ongoing and closer future collaboration within the Severn Estuary area. Both are committed to the ongoing joint working and development of compatible processes and systems through marine planning.