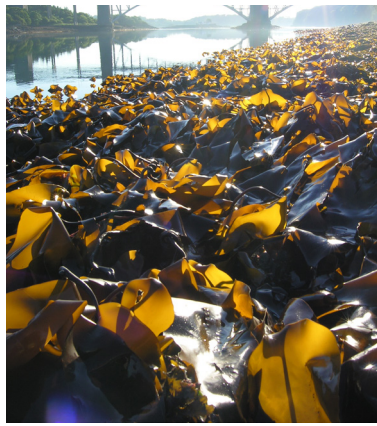




Llywodraeth Cymru
Welsh Government

Marine Protected Area (MPA) Network Management

PROGRESS REPORT 2022-2024





Marine Protected Area (MPA) Network Management

This document is the fifth Marine Protected Area (MPA) Network Management Annual Report produced by the MPA Management Steering Group (Steering Group). Its primary purpose is to provide a progress update on delivery of the actions included in the MPA Network Management Actions for 2022-2024 (hereafter referred to as the 2022-2024 Actions). The 2022-2024 Actions brought together, priority network-level actions to improve MPA management and, therefore, improve or maintain condition of the network of MPAs in Wales. Each action supported at least one of the five management principles identified in the MPA Network Management Framework for Wales 2018-2023 (hereafter referred to as the Framework). The Framework sets the direction of travel for management of the MPA network in Wales with the Action Plan as a key tool for Management Authorities to guide delivery of the long-term vision for the management of the network:

The Welsh MPA network is under effective and consistent management which safeguards the marine wildlife and habitats of sites and leads to site features achieving or maintaining favourable condition. Network management supports resilient marine ecosystems, which in turn help to achieve clean, safe, healthy, sustainable, productive, and biologically diverse Welsh seas. MPAs are valued for the long-term benefits they provide to the people of Wales through the protection of their rich natural and cultural heritage.

This Annual Report includes information on both outputs and outcomes of management activities, reflecting on how actions are contributing to improving MPA management and, therefore, to improving or maintaining the condition of the MPA network in support of this vision. It also provides an opportunity for organisations to highlight network and local scale work that complement the actions undertaken by Management Authorities¹. In preparing this Annual Report, the Steering Group has considered how it can better assess and critique the contribution the actions have made to the overall condition of the MPA network in Wales.

Report Structure

Management Authorities have provided an update on delivery progress for each of their actions since the previous Action Plan. The report summarises the action and the outputs and outcomes for each, concluding this iteration of the Framework. The full report can be accessed by visiting the Welsh Government website gov.wales/marine-protected-areas-0.

Future Action

The Marine Protected Area (MPA) Network Management Framework for Wales sets out the structure for improving the management and condition of the network of MPAs in Wales for the period 2018-2023. It also forms the basis against which the Welsh Government's MPA Network Management Grant Scheme applications are assessed, and seeks to align with wider UK, regional and international management and reporting requirements. The Framework covers a five-year cycle and now requires an update for its next iteration.

The Welsh Government have requested that the Joint Nature Conservation Committee (JNCC) coordinate the review and update of the Framework to ensure it is fit for purpose, reflects progress and changes in policy drivers since 2018, and reflects future ambitions for Wales's MPA network.

¹ A term used to refer collectively to organisations with statutory responsibilities in relation to any type of MPA, or who are significant seabed or coastal landowners. This includes relevant and competent authorities as defined by the Conservation of Habitats and Species Regulations (2017), the Conservation of Offshore Marine Habitats and Species Regulations (2017) and public authorities as defined by the Marine and Coastal Access Act (2009). A term used to refer collectively to organisations with statutory responsibilities in relation to any type of MPA, or who are significant seabed or coastal landowners. This includes relevant and competent authorities as defined by the Conservation of Habitats and Species Regulations (2017), the Conservation of Offshore Marine Habitats and Species Regulations (2017) and public authorities as defined by the Marine and Coastal Access Act (2009). Please see Annex 3 of the MPA Network Management Framework for a list of Management Authorities in Wales: gov.wales/marine-protected-area-network-management-framework-wales

MPA Network Action Plan 2022-2024 – Summary of Progress:

Integrate sustainable management of the MPA network with the Area Statement Process and delivery

Lead Organisation: Natural Resources Wales

Delivery Timescale: Ongoing

Action Description:

The MPA Management Action Plan is embedded in the [Area Statements](#), which were published in March 2020.

Area Statements delivery will focus on a range of actions relevant to the management of MPAs across Wales.

Many of the relevant actions were already embedded in the [2021-22 MPA Network Management Action Plan](#).

The focus over 2021-22 was on engagement with a wide range of stakeholders to agree collaborative steps which we can take to deliver the actions in the identified themes of:

- Nature based solutions and adaptation in the coastal zone.
- Supporting implementation of marine planning; and
- Building the resilience of the marine environment.

Progress Summary:

NRW have continued to support Ocean Literacy work across Wales by supporting the Welsh Ocean Literacy Steering and Coalition groups (as part of the wider CaSP (Welsh Coast and Seas Partnership) group).

In January 2025 the group published the [Ocean Literacy strategy](#) for Wales (Y môr a Ni). This highlights where we are across Wales and outlines six key action areas for future work and collaboration.

In addition to this, NRW have developed an [Ocean Literacy animation](#) which shows how we are all connected to the Sea and helped support two pilot “Festival of the Sea events” (lead by North Wales Wildlife Trust).

NRW have continued to support the development of projects under Nature Networks aimed at improving the management and condition of our Marine Protected Area Network in Wales.

In addition, the Marine Area Statement continues to produce quarterly newsletters to promote the work that we are doing across Marine teams within NRW and alongside partner organisations ([more info here](#)).

Further, develop a risk based marine monitoring programme across the MPA network

Lead Organisation: Welsh Government

Delivery Timescale: Ongoing

Action Description:

The Welsh Government is continuing to work with NRW, JNCC and other science and policy experts to enable integrated, cost-effective monitoring. This monitoring will fulfil our nature conservation obligations, provide the evidence to assess and detect trends in the health and biological diversity of our seas and underpin the sustainable management of our natural resources.

Whilst the new programme is being implemented, the current monitoring programme will continue to be delivered.

Progress Summary:

Whilst statutory monitoring continues, Welsh Government continues to explore a UK wide monitoring programme based on the identified monitoring options to support the MPA network. Welsh Government are continuing discussions with UK and Devolved Governments in how to deliver this.

MPA Network Condition Improvement Programme

Lead Organisation: Natural Resources Wales

Delivery Timescale: Ongoing

Action Description:

This ongoing programme of work explores potential management actions, where required, to address identified pressures and threats for the MPA network.

This year the programme will focus on working with local management officers to develop projects from existing and new actions and explore possible funding routes to deliver next year. Projects will prioritise actions which can deliver improvements to condition or improving understanding of key pressures and threats.

Progress Summary:

The Marine Protected Area (MPA) Condition Improvement Programme is delivered by Natural Resources Wales and reviews MPA site management actions, provides advice, delivers and supports projects to improve the condition of marine features across the Welsh MPA Network. Between 2022 and 2025 the MPA Condition Improvement Programme has been particularly focused on the following:

Water Quality: Work has focused on bringing the site management actions up to date, reviewing and identifying new actions for delivery. This has fed into wider workstreams within NRW, including projects being delivered under the Welsh Government Nature and Climate Emergency Capital Water Quality programme linked to Opportunity Catchments (2022-2025).

Marine Fisheries: A strategic review of marine fisheries actions on MPAs has been completed, bringing these up to date based on outputs from the Assessing Welsh Fisheries Activities project, adding new actions where necessary.

Landfill Sites at the Coast: In 2022-2023 NRW successfully delivered a project investigating the potential impacts of coastal landfill sites in Wales on MPA features, funded by the WG MPA Management Steering Group grant scheme. Building on initial findings, a project will be delivered as part of the Welsh Government Nature and Climate Emergency Capital Nature Networks programme 2025-26, to improve this understanding at particular pressure hotspots along the Welsh coast.

MPA Management Case Studies: Sixteen MPA management case studies have been developed and disseminated to other MPA managers and related groups. Covering a range of work delivered by NRW, Welsh Government and partners, these case studies enable knowledge sharing, highlighting and addressing common challenges across projects, and support working together to build the resilience of marine ecosystems across the MPA network.

Project Development: Work has been focused on the development and delivery of 10 multi-year projects aimed at improving the condition of marine features in Welsh MPAs funded by the Welsh Government Nature and Climate Emergency Capital Nature Networks programme (2022-2025).

NRW has also been developing a suite of new projects to continue improving the MPA Network across Wales, with delivery starting in 2025-2026 funded through the Welsh Government Nature and Climate Emergency Capital Nature Networks programme. These projects incorporate new key evidence, such as Natural Resources Wales recently published condition assessments for Welsh European marine sites.

Develop consistent and proportionate guidance to improve casework advice, and to support implementation of the Welsh National Marine Plan

Lead Organisation: Natural Resources Wales, Joint Nature Conservation Committee

Delivery Timescale: Ongoing

Action Description:

The purpose of this work is to develop guidance to support consistent and proportionate assessment of the impacts of regulated activities on the protected features of MPAs in Wales.

Guidance is being developed to support implementation of Welsh National Marine Plan policies in decision making e.g., marine licencing and policy specific guidance.

Progress Summary:

Progress has been steadily ongoing and has been picking up recently in the production and updating of existing guidance. Examples of published guidance has included:

- Information to support environmental assessments for Marine Cabling activities.
- Position Statement on Behavioural disturbance of Harbour Porpoise from underwater noise.
- Position Statements relating to effects of marine developments on marine mammals, mortality and site integrity.
- Assessment reports and information on assessing Welsh Aquaculture Activities.
- Marine and coastal physical process assessments.
- Web content updates relating to Marine Protected Areas and Marine Licensing.
- Improving the Band 1 Marine Licence application process.
- Internal guidance for the deemed marine licence process.

Improvements have also been made to the marine guidance and marine licensing webpages making it easier to navigate to specific and relevant sections.

The above are available on the NRW marine guidance and marine licensing webpages:

www.naturalresources.wales/guidance-and-advice/business-sectors/marine/?lang=en

www.naturalresources.wales/permits-and-permissions/marine-licensing/?lang=en

Deliver MPA management through regulatory consenting and assessment processes

Lead Organisation: Welsh Government, All management authorities

Delivery Timescale: Ongoing

Action Description:

The aim of this work is to make sure that regulatory consenting, assessment processes and activity enabling decision making processes take account of the potential impacts to the MPA network and include appropriate mitigation where necessary.

Progress Summary:

This year NRW continued to determine Marine Licences while considering the potential effects on MPAs within all decisions. Where necessary, appropriate mitigatory measures were included as condition(s) within these Marine Licences.

Welsh Government issued a number of fisheries legislation exemptions for a variety of scientific research. Many of these exemptions required an HRA, which confirmed that the exemptions would have no impact on protected species and habitats.

On 22 October 2024, Welsh Government published a consultation on proposed updates to the list of exempted activities in Wales. The consultation closed on 14 January, and the summary of responses to the consultation was published on 25 March.

In response to the consultation, some respondents suggested a further four activities could potentially be exempt from the marine licensing process. Following an assessment by officials, a second consultation is currently underway to seek views on the four additional activities proposed for an exemption. The consultation closed on 27 June.

Improve maps of the extent and distribution of Annex I habitats

Lead Organisation: Natural Resources Wales

Delivery Timescale: Ongoing (as new data becomes available)

Action Description:

This work provides key evidence to support management of SACs (e.g. casework advice) and national level reporting. This mainly involves collation of third party data (e.g. UKHO multibeam data) to update maps.

Progress Summary:

In 2024-2025 a selection of the Annex I maps have been updated to inform Regulation 9a Reporting. These will be updated on DataMapWales by the end of the year: **Marine Article 17 Habitats Features | DataMapWales**. Maps for the following features were updated:

- Atlantic salt meadows.
- Salicornia and other annuals colonizing mud and sand.
- Estuaries.
- Mudflats and sandflats not covered by seawater at low tide.
- Submarine structures made by leaking gases.
- Reefs.

In addition, several coastal Annex I habitat maps were updated, although many of these do not overlap with MPAs. The Annex I habitat maps will continue to be updated.

Address coastal squeeze impacts on MPAs

Lead Organisation: Natural Resources Wales, Welsh Government

Delivery Timescale: Ongoing

Action Description:

This project will continue to gather evidence to understand the impacts of coastal squeeze on our MPA network including continued engagement with UK wide discussions and projects.

Work will continue in Wales to progress habitat creation projects to provide compensatory coastal habitat for anticipated habitat loss arising from work associated with flood and coastal erosion risk management schemes.

Progress Summary:

A 3-year contract was awarded to ABPmer in October 2022 and was completed successfully in autumn 2024. The project analysed various data using GIS and a coastal squeeze assessment tool to analyse the potential for coastal squeeze on MPA habitats (losses and gains) under two sea level rise scenarios, and three different management scenarios (all current defences are maintained; Shoreline Management Plan policies are applied; defences are not maintained and are allowed to fail).

The project also identified areas where the impacts of coastal squeeze could be mitigated. Where accommodation space is found behind structures, the presence of a Managed Realignment policy could provide potential for adaptation.

Project outputs include GIS data, a set of coastal squeeze assessment tools, and two reports: **Understanding the likely scale of deterioration of Marine Protected Area features due to coastal squeeze: Volume 1 – Methodology** and **Understanding the likely scale of deterioration of Marine Protected Area features due to coastal squeeze: Volume 2 – Results and Discussion**. In the final year, there was also a push to disseminate and promote discussion of the results. This took place via a series of internal and external workshops with stakeholders and Welsh Government.

The second phase of work under Nature Networks on addressing coastal squeeze is just getting underway, and will involve improving accessibility to the data produced from Phase 1 as well as some further analysis; work to explore issues which may exacerbate coastal squeeze (i.e. implementing hold the line rather than managed realignment or no active intervention); investigation of mechanisms to reduce barriers to coastal adaptation; and work to consider how new or potential habitat can be effectively safeguarded.

Deliver the priority actions within the Marine Litter Action Plan where they provide benefit to the network of MPAs in Wales

Lead Organisation: Wales Clean Seas Partnership, Welsh Government

Delivery Timescale: Complete

Action Description:

The Wales Clean Seas Partnership (WCSP) are responsible for developing and delivering the Marine Litter Action Plan (MLAP) for Wales.

The current three-year plan is closely aligned with similar strategies focusing on tackling terrestrial litter in Wales. The MLAP supports wider work to address Single Use Plastics and waste initiatives in Wales, taking a 'prevention at source' approach.

The partnership will:

- Review annual beach clean surveys across Wales.
- Discuss and propose how to address emerging litter items of concern affecting the marine environment.
- Support the development of the Welsh Fishing Gear Recycling Scheme.

Progress Summary:

The partnership continues to support and influence a number of key policy areas such as; single use plastics, microplastics, fishing gear and behavioural change.

The partnership supported the introduction of the UK's first nationwide fishing gear recycling scheme covering over 10 ports in Wales.

Develop a UK Cetacean Conservation Strategy

Lead Organisation: Welsh Government, Natural Resources Wales, Joint Nature Conservation Committees

Delivery Timescale: Autumn 2025

Action Description:

This work aims to develop a consistent, UK-wide approach to managing pressures and threats on nine of the most commonly found dolphin, porpoise and small whale species in UK waters within and outside MPAs.

Progress Summary:

The UK and Devolved Governments continue to work collaboratively on the Strategy and are aiming to produce a response to the consultation in Autumn 2025.

Assess and where necessary manage the impact of commercial fishing activities on MPAs

Lead Organisation: Welsh Government, Natural Resources Wales

Delivery Timescale: Ongoing

Action Description:

The aim of the project is to ensure that commercial fisheries management within European Marine Sites affords adequate protection to designated features, in line with the EU Birds and Habitats Directives.

The project is assessing interactions between species and habitats and different types of fisheries gear. These assessments are being used to inform whether future fisheries management measures are necessary.

In 2022, project activities included:

- 9 mammal vs fixed nets.
- 40 habitats vs mobile towed gears.
- 20 further assessments to be agreed by the steering group.

Progress Summary:

Welsh Government are into the final year of assessments in 2025 with all prior assessments completed. Please note, prior assessments are still being finalised prior to publication. Please see below the first two batches published:

- Pots and Traps: [Assessing Welsh Fisheries Activities project: pots and traps | GOV.WALES](#) and [Prosiect Asesu Gweithgareddau Pysgodfeydd Cymru: cewyll a thrapiau | LLYW.CYMRU](#)
- Demersal Trawls: www.gov.wales/assessing-welsh-fisheries-activities-project-demersal-trawls and www.llyw.cymru/prosiect-asesu-gweithgareddau-pysgodfeydd-cymru-treillongau-demersal

Operate a risk based approach to fisheries enforcement

Lead Organisation: Welsh Government

Delivery Timescale: Ongoing

Action Description:

This work, which includes enforcement and prosecution, within the Welsh zone and its MPAs, operates a risk-based and intelligence-led approach to marine enforcement, using technological improvements to maintain a focus on high-risk fisheries activities.

It serves to act as a strong deterrent to help prevent unlawful fishing activities and contribute towards the continued protection of MPA features and the overall condition of the network.

Progress Summary:

During 2024-25, a reduction in staff within the enforcement team has impacted our delivery. Resources have been focused on the main risks, including delivering the following:

- Fishery Protection Vessels completed 44 patrols which enabled 89 vessel inspections at sea.
- At the quay side, a further 186 vessels were inspected.
- Marine Licensing inspections numbered 36.
- A further 27 inspections were conducted at the premises of Registered Buyers of first sale fish.

A number of investigations into fishery offences, some serious in nature, passed through the judicial system. All 14 cases taken were successfully prosecuted with significant financial penalties being issued by the courts. A further 9 investigations resulted in Fixed Administrative Penalties being the most appropriate means of disposal.

Welsh Seabird Conservation Strategy

Lead Organisation: Welsh Government, RSPB

Delivery Timescale: Ongoing

Action Description:

The aims of the Welsh Seabird Conservation Strategy are to produce up-to-date vulnerability assessments of seabird populations in Welsh waters, the coastline and at colonies in Wales, based on the best available evidence:

- Identify the most important pressures and threats for each species, and whether there are commonalities across species.
- Assess how key pressures and threats are currently being managed and whether there are gaps in the available evidence, in monitoring and the management needed.
- Develop, and publish prioritised high-level recommendations where conservation efforts in Wales will need to focus to improve the resilience for seabirds in Wales.
- Ensure conservation action for seabirds by establishing a suitable funding mechanism, to support individual actions to address the high-level recommendations.

Progress Summary:

Consultation closed in February, responses are being collated and should be published early in the Summer. The working group have completed all vulnerability assessments and are building towards a proposed plan of recommendations amongst species and pressures.

[Welsh seabird conservation strategy | GOV.WALES](#)

RSPB Grassholm surveillance project (HPAI) **NEW ACTION**

Lead Organisation: RSPB

Delivery Timescale: Ongoing

Action Description:

Establishing more robust and frequent monitoring techniques to track Highly Pathogenic Avian Influenza (HPAI) outbreaks and their impact on Northern Gannet populations.

Progress Summary:

The aim of this objective in 2023 and 2024 was to pilot season long surveillance and accurately monitor the arrival and spread of the disease. RSPB also aimed to monitor the impact the disease was having on the colony from a productivity viewpoint. Both of these aims would allow the project to act as an 'early warning system' for others within the wider MPA and Local Authority network. Based on experience gained in 2023 RSPB were able to apply their learnings to 2024. These learning experiences were:

- Most suitable drone flight height and how weather conditions affected the clarity of the images being studied (time of day, shadows on sunny days).
- The importance of repeatable transects.
- Which areas could not be accurately assessed from the water/land (when the drone wasn't available).
- A better understanding of what outbreaks looked like as opposed to occasional natural die off within the colony.

Monitoring the arrival and spread of the disease requires regular visits, something that can prove costly for a remote island. The funding from this project once again allowed RSPB to carry out monthly visits to Grassholm on a chartered vessel and employ a drone operator for each trip.

The colony saw no recorded cases of HPAI in 2024, the regular systematic monitoring allowed robust monthly checks, using lessons learned from 2023 with regards to drone flight height, angle of flight and how to interpret the data. Any early detections would have been notified to other e-NGO's that are responsible for important seabird colonies such as Skomer and Skokholm within the MPA network. Had it been required, staff would have been in a position to liaise with Pembrokeshire CC to forewarn them of any potential repeat of the public health issues that were seen in 2022 when no such 'early warning system' was in place.

Gwynedd County Council – Community litter and disturbance project

Lead Organisation: Gwynedd County Council

Delivery Timescale: Completed March 2023

Action Description:

Aim to develop and roll out a method of collecting angling line for recycling in Wales. The aim of this project is to recycle old angling line, removing from the marine environment and reducing negative impacts for people and wildlife. This project was funded through Welsh Government's Marine Protected Area (MPA) Management Steering Group call to action for the MPA Network Management Action Plan 2022-2023.

Progress Summary:

A total of **14 bins** have been installed or allocated across various sites within the Welsh Partnership of Marine Protected Areas (MPAs), with more locations still being finalized.

Understanding the distribution and survival of Twaite Shad at sea

Lead Organisation: Swansea University

Delivery Timescale: March 2022

Action Description:

The study aims to investigate the mortality, migration, and seasonal distribution of River Tywi twaite shad in marine and freshwater environments, focusing on their use of the Carmarthen Bay SAC and movements in the wider Bristol Channel. Objectives include tagging adult twaite shad, deploying acoustic receivers to track their movements and survival, analysing data for patterns in mortality and area usage, and comparing findings with existing data from the River Severn stored in Swansea University's tracking database.

Progress Summary:

The pilot study for the River Tywi has made significant progress, with key objectives achieved. Rod fishing proved to be highly effective, and the internal tag implantation method demonstrated high survival rates (around 90%). Preliminary findings indicate the Carmarthen Bay Marine Protected Area and the inner Severn Estuary are crucial foraging areas for twaite shad during summer and early winter. However, data collection is ongoing, with marine survival data expected in April-May 2024, and some receivers' data still pending. Notably, detections near Hinkley Point C suggest potential risks to UK twaite shad populations.

Next Steps:

Further funding has been secured from Natural Resources Wales, Natural England, Nature Networks Fund, Welsh Governments Tidal Lagoon challenge, and EDF to continue studies of twaite shad in the Bristol Channel during 2024 and beyond.

Investigation the impact of landfill sites at the coast on MPA Features

Lead Organisation: Natural Resources Wales

Delivery Timescale: March 2022

Action Description:

This project aims to enhance understanding of the risks posed by coastal landfill sites to Marine Protected Area (MPA) features and identify priority locations where preventative or mitigation measures are most needed. By analysing over 900 landfill sites across Wales – many located within or near MPAs – the project takes a network-wide approach to assess site-specific impacts, identify vulnerable features, and explore practical options for intervention. The ultimate goal is to inform more cost-effective, targeted actions that prevent deterioration of MPA condition, reduce future reactive management costs, and improve resilience across the marine environment.

Progress Summary:

The project delivered a high-level assessment identifying which coastal landfill sites in Wales pose the greatest potential threat to Marine Protected Area (MPA) habitat features. It highlighted key areas of concern, particularly the Dee Estuary, Burry Inlet, and Severn Estuary, with widespread high-threat sites also found across all Operational Areas. The findings offer a strategic overview to prioritise further, more detailed site-specific investigations.

The study has concluded, and its results should guide future work to ground-truth risk levels and better understand how landfill waste might be transported and affect marine environments.

The final report is available here: [Investigating the impact of landfill sites at the coast on Marine Protected Area features in Wales](#)

NRW's Marine Nature Networks Programme

Lead Organisation: Natural Resources Wales

Delivery Timescale: 2022 to 2025

Action Description:

The Nature Networks (NN) marine projects have completed the second year of a three-year programme. All reports and deliverables will be produced in the final year which represents the culmination of the three-year programme for most projects. Projects were set up as three-year work programmes and the final year will focus on ensuring delivery of the outputs, which includes finalising evidence outputs, management recommendations and delivery of management and restoration measures.

The programme has also looked for opportunities to communicate the projects more widely and increase collaborations with external stakeholders, resulting in the following initiatives:

- Seven academic collaborations, supporting outputs of the projects through targeted research.
- Seven student placement opportunities or part-funding of post-graduate work.
- Presentation of marine Nature Networks projects at various conferences and events such as Coastal Futures, Porcupine, ReMeMaRe, Royal Welsh Show etc.
- Partnership working with a range of stakeholders including SAC Relevant Authority Groups, Harbour authorities, Local Authorities, Angling Groups, Defra etc.
- Regular social media posts and wider press stories.

Progress Summary:

The following projects have been completed or are at near completion:

- 1) Implementing management measures for bait collection across the MPA network in Wales.
- 2) Marine Invasive Non-Native Species (INNS) Biosecurity Planning across the MPA Network
- 3) Investigations into the decline of benthic habitats and species and identification and deliver of management measures required to reverse biodiversity loss and increase marine resilience
- 4) Marine litter and derelict vessel prevention and management across the Welsh MPA network
- 5) Improving Marine Conservation Advice (IMCA)
- 6) Rumney Great Wharf polders
- 7) Welsh Acoustic Marine Mammal Survey (WAMMS)
- 8) Understanding the likely scale of deterioration of MPA features due to coastal squeeze.