



Fostering Ecosystem-Based Marine Spatial Planning in the Celtic Sea

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Research context

Marine Spatial Planning (MSP) is the main governance process that ideally balances economic, ecological and socio-cultural goals through the regulation of human uses at sea. With the global and regional conservation and green energy targets ahead, there is an urgent need to better align MSP and strategic conservation planning, hence the operationalisation of an ecosystem approach to MSP. The EU-funded project MarinePlan supports the implementation of ecosystem-based MSP through the development of a Decision Support System (DSS). To inform the DSS, research has been conducted on the effectiveness of current governance regimes across eight European study sites, including the Celtic Sea. Through an institutional and policy audit, supported by interviews and a questionnaire survey with key marine actors, detailed information has been developed on the barriers and enablers of adaptive marine governance in each region.

Governance targets and objectives

The proposed MPA Bill appeared to be a key means of achieving conservation targets in the Celtic Sea region. However, rather than being a standalone piece of legislation, policymakers are exploring how best to integrate it with existing MSP law. Such a move may signal a shift in priorities, potentially placing conservation objectives behind offshore renewable energy (ORE) ambitions. Although this could help to streamline marine governance in Ireland, it risks diluting the focus and urgency required to fulfil biodiversity targets. Additionally, Ireland has yet to designate OECMs or EBSAs. As such, there remains significant progress to be achieved on conservation targets. This research has identified several governance challenges that are obstructing the fulfilment of such ambitions. These challenges, as well as proposed solutions to overcome them, are listed on the page below.

Barriers to achieving targets and recommendations



Barrier #1 – Lack of capacity and resourcing among government departments and agencies to deliver effective policy and decisions in an efficient manner

Recommendation – To enhance capacity, a systematic process that can identify where resourcing for management actions or processes is low should be developed and implemented. A government agency should be identified to lead the process. This should involve assessing what type of resources are required (e.g., staff, training, monitoring, technology), before delegating and outsourcing tasks to address identified issues. The process should also include regular evaluations, wherein expenditure and resource usage are monitored.



Barrier #2 – Impaired integration between government departments and fragmentation of data

Recommendation – Providing resources to enhance cross-departmental working and advisory groups that facilitate shared spaces to negotiate management action on specific issues can improve communication and knowledge sharing within government. This should involve the designation of integration champions that can build bridges across departments and help to build a culture of collaboration within government. In turn, this can support the enhancement and maintenance of current data repositories. These include the Marine Atlas and Marine Data Catalogue portals managed by the Marine Institute, as well as the National Biodiversity Data Centre. Effort should also be made to feed data into existing open repositories, such as the Marine Data Catalogue.



Barrier #3 – Limited harmonisation of competing objectives regarding the management of the marine environment

Recommendation – Encourage the harmonisation of competing policy objectives by supporting the establishment of a cross-government structure to bring together all Departments and Agencies with a marine remit. This structure must build on the progress made by Project Ireland Marine, a group chaired by the Assistant Secretary for Marine Planning that was established in 2024. The revised structure should provide for alignment of marine policies and of state investment in the maritime sector, giving leadership and oversight on a whole of government basis. It must also take multiple, simultaneous uses of shared ocean spaces into account.



Barrier #4 – Lack of clarity and consistency regarding the monitoring and revision of legislation

Recommendation – The government should create a structured evaluation framework that ensures regular reviews of policies (every 4-6 years) are conducted to identify potential issues, as well as establishing how necessary adjustments should be made. This evaluation framework must be closely linked to forward planning and subsequent implementation and enforcement. SMART indicators should also be used to assess MPA performance against their design objectives.

More information

To read more on MarinePlan's recommendations for the Celtic Sea, click on the below links to an ArcGIS StoryMap, Deliverable reports, and a publication presenting an EB-MSP assessment tool:

ArcGIS StoryMap

'Fostering ecosystem-based MSP in the Celtic Sea'



Deliverable 4.1

'Report on existing policies and institutions'



Deliverable 4.2

'Report on adaptive capacity of governance'



EB-MSP Assessment Tool

'Assessment tool to address implementation challenges of EBM principles in MSP processes'



References

ArcGIS StoryMap – <https://arcg.is/OT99y1>

Deliverable 4.1 – doi.org/10.5281/zenodo.10829632

Deliverable 4.2 – doi.org/10.5281/zenodo.13862281

EB-MSP Assessment Tool – doi.org/10.1038/s43247-024-01975-7

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