

# Engaging Island Communities in Marine Planning



## Context

Marine planning helps to understand the distribution of natural assets, infrastructure and human activities in marine areas. The process aims to balance priorities and allocate space to achieve environmental, economic and social objectives. It marks a shift from the management of individual marine economic sectors ‘in silos’ to a more integrated and holistic approach to planning.

One of the most important aspects of marine planning is effective stakeholder participation to help manage environmental interactions, competition for space and community aspirations.

Orkney Islands Council has delivered an extensive programme to engage island communities in marine planning during 2022 to 2024.



The Orkney Islands Regional Marine Plan: Consultation Draft (the Plan) was prepared by OIC to guide decision making on sustainable development, activities and use in the Orkney Islands marine region. The Plan will deliver environmental, social, economic, marine ecosystem and community well-being objectives. It was developed through an inclusive process of partnership working and stakeholder participation with significant input from the Orkney Marine Planning Advisory Group which includes organisations representing commercial, environmental, recreational and community interests.

The Orkney Islands Marine Region: Finfish Farming Spatial Guidance: Consultation Draft was deposited for consultation alongside the Plan. This guidance helps identify areas of potential sensitivity or constraint for finfish farming development in Orkney and is supported by an online interactive mapping tool.

The draft Plan and supporting assessments were deposited for public consultation from the 1st of August to the 25th of October 2024. The aim of the consultation, and wider community and stakeholder engagement process, was to engage as diverse an audience as possible. This included designing engagement activities to each island community's needs and capturing views from young people, businesses, fishers, marinas and community organisations. OIC are committed to ensuring that local communities can engage directly with the plan-making process. The consultation and engagement process provided valuable information and local knowledge that has informed the preparation of the final Plan, supporting assessments, spatial guidance and ongoing marine management in Orkney.

## What Happened

In early 2022, the Marine Planning team delivered a programme of community engagement events in Kirkwall, Stromness, St Margaret's Hope, Stronsay, Sanday, Westray and Hoy, including school workshops. This early engagement outlined the scope and purpose of the forthcoming regional marine plan and raised awareness of the marine planning process. This engagement highlighted the need to go above and beyond the statutory consultation requirements so that island communities felt informed and understood the process, prior to depositing the Plan for consultation.

Eleven local school sessions were delivered by our Marine Planning team to engage young people with marine planning issues and to find out what they valued in the marine environment, the marine economy and marine resources.

This included four classroom workshops delivered in 2022 as part of the early engagement phase, three SmartSTEM workshops delivered at Kirkwall Grammer School in 2024, and the remaining four classroom workshops delivered during the formal regional marine plan consultation in 2024.

These workshops included a 30-minute interactive presentation exploring the marine environment, developments and activities around Orkney, and the many ways in which local communities rely on marine resources. This was followed by playing the Marine Spatial



Planning Challenge boardgame, with a spatial planning scenario set up that reflects the marine planning challenges faced in Orkney.

To enhance the learning experience, 3D printed models of marine development and environmental features were fabricated for the Marine Spatial Planning Challenge board game. Young people's views were captured on what they believe are important aspects of the marine environment and economy, and how they should be managed.

As part of the formal public consultation phase, ten community consultation and engagement events were delivered in multiple locations on the Orkney Islands.

A high turnout was experienced for the consultation events, six of which were on the ferry-linked isles as well as Kirkwall, Stromness, Finstown and St Margaret's Hope. Each event was set up in a location where local people visit as part of their day-to-day activities including local cafés, development trust centres, community hubs and youth clubs.

Short presentations were used to explain marine management issues and short films were shown to showcase the special nature of Orkney's marine environment. Locally sourced refreshments were provided which very much helped to boost stakeholder turn out for the events.

Digital mapping software was used at the events to share spatial planning outputs and data. Spatial information provided by community members was captured. This data will help to inform the baseline data for marine planning in Orkney and address data gaps.

Two online community consultation and engagement sessions were delivered to maximise participation opportunities. These events were advertised online, via email to stakeholders and in the printed press.

Interviews were carried out to inform understanding of the costs and benefits that businesses might experience because of the Plan. This included interviews with aquaculture, renewable energy, fisheries and local tourism businesses, to capture varied views on the Plans' impacts on businesses from a variety of economic sectors and business sizes.

This engagement process helped to assess the likely costs, benefits and risks of implementing the Plan policies for businesses and employers in Orkney. Consideration has been given to the potential for any disproportionate impacts on micro or small businesses in comparison to businesses of greater size.

## Areas of Collaboration

When preparing the Plan, Marine Planners collaborated with other services including Marine Services, Engineering Services, Economic Development, Environmental Health, Estates and Education and Leisure.



Marine Planners worked closely with the Orkney Marine Planning Advisory Group (OMPAG) to develop the Plan policies. OMPAG includes organisations representing the key marine commercial, environmental and recreational interests in Orkney.

## Overall Result

Community engagement and consultation has helped to create a regional marine plan shaped by Orkney communities and wider stakeholders. National policy often implements a 'one size fits all' approach, however, one size does not always fit, particularly in an island context.

When adopted, the Plan will provide a locally appropriate marine planning policy framework that empowers local communities to deliver sustainable development, realise economic opportunities and protect the marine environment.

Local communities and schools have provided very positive feedback on the effectiveness of the engagement process and how it has improved their understanding of marine management and planning issues.

## Lessons Learned

Listening is important. Let the participants lead the conversation. They are more likely to engage if the topic is relevant to their interests. Try to not overly steer the conversation, let participants come to you with their issues first.

Take time to reach out to schools. Young people have very interesting and have relevant perspectives that should inform planning policy.

Language used may need to be tailored to each stakeholder. Make sure to use day-to-day language and terminology where possible.

Bring paper documents to go through with the participants and provide options for written comments to be submitted easily if people are less technology inclined. Provide paper documents for participants to take away.

People are more likely to talk if they are comfortable. Providing a relaxed environment and refreshments allows people to stay longer and interact in more depth.

Informal 'drop-in' sessions are more engaging for inexperienced stakeholders, avoid formal presentations and question and answer sessions.

The methods of promotion and advertising are particularly important. Advertise in places where local people go and where they engage in relevant activities.



Work with local organisations, for example Development Trusts, they are an excellent source of information, advertising and they can help to spread the word about consultation and engagement activities.

## Successes

Young people's knowledge about the marine environment and economy is remarkably well informed and their feedback has helped to shape the preparation of the regional marine plan. Schools that participated in the engagement sessions have expressed enthusiasm to further engage with marine planning and environmental management. This has built relationships with schools and created opportunities for the future.

There were over 250 people that attended the island engagement events, and many in-depth discussions held about the Plan and more general marine planning topics and themes. This also translated into a high number of more formal, written responses to the Orkney Islands Regional Marine Plan Consultation.

In recognition of early career impact, Daniel Morris, Marine Planner, was shortlisted for the Bob Earl Award for Early Career Impact in January 2025. Daniel's work to engage Orkney communities in marine planning was highlighted as a significant contribution to planning practice.

The collaboration between the Marine Planners and the Improvement Service to publish bespoke marine infrastructure data was outlined as a Key Achievement in the Improvement Service Annual Report 2024. This work allows members of the public and other organisations to find, access and use Orkney's marine data. This is first time this has been done through the Improvement Service.

## Challenges

Meaningfully engaging local communities in a remote island context takes time to deliver and is resource intensive. External funding was provided from the Scottish Government's Marine Fund Scotland to deliver the broad range of engagement activities.

Making sure people are aware of the engagement and consultation taking place, and delivering the message to the most remote places can be challenging. Many hard-to-reach groups, for example fishermen, need to be engaged in places and at times that work for them.

