



FISHERIES MANAGEMENT PROPOSALS FOR INSHORE MARINE PROTECTED AREAS AND PRIORITY MARINE FEATURES

Report by Chief Officer, Economic and Community Regeneration

PURPOSE

- 1.1 The purpose of the report is to update the Comhairle on fisheries management proposals for inshore Marine Protected Areas and Priority Marine Features, prior to launch of a public consultation between November 2025 and March 2026.

EXECUTIVE SUMMARY

- 2.1 On the 20 August 2025, the Scottish Government's Marine Directorate attended a meeting with Comhairle Members in the Council Chambers. Representatives from the Scottish Government, Nature Scot, Western Isles Fishermen's Association (WIFA) and the Comhairle attended in person and online. Marine Directorate officials provided a review of Marine Protected Areas (MPAs) and Priority Marine Features (PMF) progress, timeline and examples of fisheries management options.
- 2.2 There are various fisheries management measures proposed for over 160 site and areas in the inshore area, the vast majority of which will be on the West Coast, with a large number in and around the Western Isles. These measures will be the subject of a formal consultation which will commence in November 2025 and run for 16 weeks.
- 2.4 Dialogue with Marine Scotland has allowed early visibility of the measures proposed, and the views of industry and others in terms of the implications on these for the Western Isles. This will allow a response to the consultation to be submitted, highlighting any negative impact of these measures not just on the local fleet but the processing sector, and the wider economy and community of the Western Isles.
- 2.5 There are concerns that the proposals that have been shared to date are likely to lead to the industry operating in smaller areas, increasing competition with other marine users such as fish farming and the energy sector, and ultimately increasing fishing pressure on the remaining commercial fishing grounds.
- 2.6 On launch of the consultation, further dialogue with industry will inform a draft response to the consultation, which will be shared for approval at Sustainable Development Committee in February 2026, prior to formal submission in March.

RECOMMENDATIONS

- 3.1 **it is recommended that the Comhairle:**
 - (a) **note the Scottish Government's intention to consult on fisheries management measures for inshore Marine Protected Areas and Priority Marine Features; and**
 - (b) **agree that a response to the consultation on these proposals be developed in dialogue with the fisheries sector and shared with Members prior to formal submission.**

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IMPLICATIONS

- 4.1 The following implications are applicable in terms of the Report.

Resource Implications	Implications/None
Financial	None relating to the Comhairle
Legal	None relating to the Comhairle
Staffing	None
Assets and Property	None
Strategic Implications	Implications/None
Risk	None
Equalities	None
Corporate Strategy	Measures could impact on productivity within a key economic sector for the Outer Hebrides, to the detriment of the Comhairle's ambitions within the 2024-27 Corporate Strategy to 'Strengthen the Local Economy'.
Environmental Impact	None
Consultation	None

BACKGROUND

- 5.1 The Scottish Government's Marine Directorate will shortly be launching a public consultation on fisheries management proposals for inshore Marine Protected Areas and Priority Marine Features, which is proposed to run from November 2025 to March 2026.
- 5.2 Comhairle Elected Members, along with other local stakeholders, recently received a presentation from the Marine Directorate outlining the likely measures that will be consulted on and the approach that has been taken to identifying these measures.
- 5.3 Engagement to date has highlighted a number of areas of concern which Members have highlighted directly to the Marine Directorate, and which will be re-iterated in the response to the formal consultation exercise. The proposed consultation response will be developed in dialogue with industry and shared with Members prior to its submission by the March 2026 closing date.

OVERVIEW OF PROPOSALS TO DATE

- 6.1 The following was shared by the Marine Directorate:
- Overview of development of Marine Protected Area (MPA) and Priority Marine Features (PMF) management measures, with implementation anticipated from 2026.
 - Engagement process with Western Isles stakeholders since 2022, including 13 in-person visits to the Western Isles to meet with stakeholders.
 - Overview of the status of the marine environment, with risks increasing due to biodiversity loss and climate change, and the benefits of marine protected areas and spatial protection in respect of marine conservation.
 - Work with industry to gather data to lead to more informed decisions. Monitoring programmes and trials have been undertaken with local vessels who have provided data for analysis to inform the proposals. The Marine Directorate has sought to ensure that proposals are developed with industry – working together to address challenges and build effective mitigation, understand impacts, sustain fishing, support supply chains, grow the blue economy and create long-term sustainable opportunities.
 - Examples of proposed inshore management measures for specific sites around the Western Isles. The consultation will provide various management options for these sites, for example gear and hydraulic dredging restrictions on all or part of the sites and invite feedback on sites and measures

proposed. Work was currently being undertaken on social, economic and environmental impact assessments of proposed measures.

INITIAL FEEDBACK FROM COUNCIL MEMBERS

7.1 The following points, among others, were raised by the Comhairle in response to the proposals that have been shared to date:

- Concern that proposed measures are being driven by need to satisfy legislative requirements rather than a reflection of risk to the marine environment in the areas concerned.
- For example, the extent to which the West Coast fleet has declined since 2016 (over 60%) is not being accounted for regarding the level of pressure of the sector on the areas concerned.
- There was concern that once a site was closed or marked as a designated area it would never re-open.
- Industry is already suffering from economic and environmental pressures. There was a danger of the industry declining further with less fishers working.
- There needs to be a mechanism to correct mistakes after legislation is introduced.
- Effectiveness of local management measures in helping maintain healthy stocks and marine environments.
- Strong and specific concerns were raised on the socio-economic impact of the extent of fisheries management proposals for the Sound of Barra, for which only one option is proposed, and which is presented as being necessary to introduce, regardless of consultation feedback. Members were clear that they did not agree with this proposal and highlighted that the site had been operating very successfully with local management and seasonal closures in place. Members also queried the information used to come to this decision and the importance of socio-economic impacts having as great a weight as environmental impact.

CONCLUSION

- 8.1 The Marine Directorate's stakeholder engagement to date has allowed early insight into the inshore fisheries management measures being proposed, and consideration on the potential implications of these on the fishing industry in the Western Isles.
- 8.2 The initial consensus is that there will indeed be a negative impact on the local fleet, processing sector, and the wider economy through the introduction of these measures and closures. Depending on what is published in the final consultation, it may be necessary to further examine and challenge some of the assumptions made regarding the potential socio-economic impact of the proposed measures.
- 8.3 There are also concerns that the proposals are primarily driven by a need to meet legislative targets by Scottish Government, rather than reflecting the reality of the pressures and risks in the marine environment around the Western Isles. On launch of the consultation, it will be possible to more fully analyse potential socio-economic impact, supported through further dialogue with industry. A draft response will be shared for approval at Sustainable Development Committee in February 2026, prior to formal submission in March.