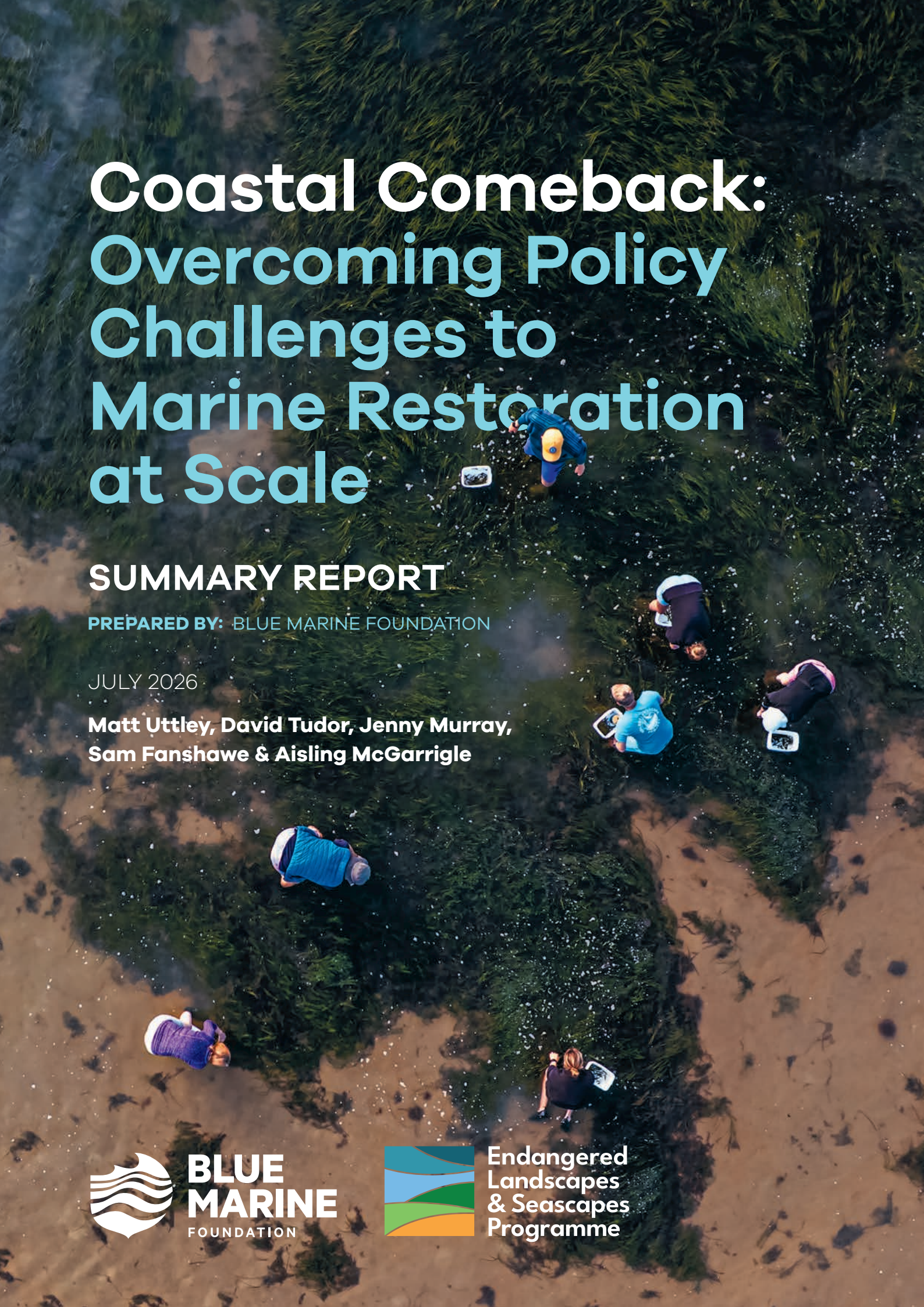

Coastal Comeback: Overcoming Policy Challenges to Marine Restoration at Scale

SUMMARY REPORT

PREPARED BY: BLUE MARINE FOUNDATION

JULY 2026

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BLUE MARINE FOUNDATION

Endangered Landscapes & Seascapes Programme

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This report was prepared by Blue Marine Foundation and draws on the expertise and insights of a wide range of organisations and individuals working across marine restoration, policy and regulation. We are particularly grateful to the practitioners, statutory bodies, Governments, academics and eNGO representatives who contributed their time and knowledge through interviews, workshops, follow-up discussions, and through the policy advisory group. Their insights were essential in identifying the policy challenges and shaping the recommendations set out in this report.

Photo Matt Jarvis

1. EXECUTIVE SUMMARY

This summary report accompanies the Coastal Comeback: Overcoming Policy Challenges to Marine Restoration at Scale report published in 2026 by Blue Marine Foundation.

Marine restoration plays a crucial role in tackling the biodiversity and climate crisis, and many countries, including the UK, have pledged to protect 30 per cent of land and sea by 2030.

There is growing scientific evidence of the significant and ongoing decline in coastal and marine habitats such as native oyster reefs, saltmarsh, and seagrass meadows. Despite this evidence, increased public and government interest, and investment in restoration practitioner capacity, restoration projects have been small scale and focused on individual habitats. Marine restoration is one of the operational mechanisms through which the UK must deliver a range of statutory and international commitments including Environmental Targets (Marine Protected Areas) Regulations 2023, the species abundance targets under the Environment Act 2021, the Environmental Improvement Plan, the UK Marine Strategy's Good Environmental Status obligations, and the UK's commitments under OSPAR and the Kunming-Montreal Global Biodiversity Framework that by 2030 at least 30 per cent of degraded marine and coastal ecosystems are under effective restoration. Larger seascape-scale efforts are needed if we are to meet these ambitious national and global commitments. At present, there is only one defined and established seascape-scale project in the UK, and around seven large-scale seascape restoration projects across Europe, although other multi-habitat projects exist, the scarcity of seascape-scale projects in the UK is partly due to the significant policy challenges to scaling up marine restoration.

The current marine licensing system was designed to manage industrial activity and prevent environmental harm, not to enable ecological recovery. As a result, restoration projects are subject to the same complex, time consuming, and costly processes as commercial development.

Through evidence and case studies drawn from across the UK and internationally, supported by extensive stakeholder engagement with regulators, governments, practitioners, and researchers, this report identifies key policy challenges that constrain marine habitat restoration delivery at the scale required to reverse decades of decline and support biodiversity recovery. It sets out phased solutions from immediate improvements such as guidance for regulators and practitioners, to longer-term legislative change, through a clear roadmap and recommendations for action supported by a legal review undertaken by The Lifescape Project. Together, these provide a practical route to a more proportionate and enabling regulatory framework - one that recognises restoration as a distinct, nature positive activity central to delivering national and global biodiversity commitments.

Photo Matt Jarvis

2. INTRODUCTION

Project context and goals

The UK's marine natural capital is valued at approximately £211 billion (ONS, UK Natural Capital Accounts: Marine and Coastal Ecosystems), yet habitats continue to experience significant long-term decline. Pressures including physical disturbance, pollution, overexploitation, and climate change have all contributed to key habitats being lost. Over the past century, native oyster reefs have declined by around 95 per cent, saltmarsh by 85 per cent, and seagrass meadows by more than 90 per cent (Environment Agency, 2022; UKCEH, 2023; Green et al., 2021), yet they provide numerous services including climate regulation by sequestering and storing carbon, providing nursery grounds for many important commercial fish species, and stabilising sediments to help protect coastlines from erosion and flooding. To reverse this decline, active restoration is urgently required, and with increasing scientific understanding, public support, and a rising number of restoration initiatives, momentum is growing. However, most restoration activity remains small-scale and fragmented, with limited progress towards seascape scale recovery. Although many factors contribute to this, a primary driver often raised by restoration practitioners is the regulatory framework through which restoration is delivered.

Active restoration projects, like all marine developments, must be assessed to identify possible impacts on the environment, before they are permitted to be undertaken. However, the current system is primarily designed to manage risk from damaging activities resulting from construction development, rather than activities to enable ecological recovery. In practice, this results in complex, multi-layered consenting processes, high costs, and lengthy timelines, significantly impacting smaller organisations including eNGOs, research institutions, and community groups. Practitioners must navigate multiple agencies and overlapping permits, including marine licensing, environmental permitting, and habitat assessments, often with limited coordination and no clear restoration-specific pathways. The result is a growing gap between the UK's statutory and international commitments, including the requirement to restore 30 per cent of degraded marine and coastal ecosystems under the Kunming-Montreal Global Biodiversity Framework, and progress on delivery. This issue has been raised repeatedly, most recently by Project Seagrass, alongside 35 leading UK scientists, who wrote an open letter in 2025 to the Secretary of State outlining the challenges (Unsworth et al., 2025).

Evidence from case studies outlined in the full report illustrate, in practical terms, the impact of the current regulatory system and licensing processes on restoration outcomes. For example, the Three Harbours case study shows that low-impact activities, in this case, sampling, can proceed quickly and at minimal cost when delivered within regulatory bodies, but face months of additional process when undertaken by NGOs or research institutions. This inconsistency introduces unnecessary burdens and disproportionately affects the many non-statutory organisations that have the expertise and remit to deliver restoration activities. However, these case studies also highlight that a more enabling approach is achievable. In Wales, the introduction of a seagrass exemption in April 2026 shows how proportionate reform can be delivered within existing frameworks. In Scotland, the Marine and Coastal Restoration Plan (2025) establishes a coordinated approach to accelerating restoration.

This report provides a clear and concise summary of the case for reforming policy to enable marine restoration at scale in the UK. It distils the key evidence, challenges and recommendations from the full Coastal Comeback: Overcoming Policy Challenges to Restoration at Scale report, drawing on UK-wide case studies and policy analysis focused on England and Wales, where the scale of the challenge and opportunity for reform are greatest. The full report sets out a practical case for change. It identifies the policy barriers limiting marine restoration, shows how these constraints affect delivery, and presents sector-wide evidence that the current system does not operate proportionately for restoration projects. It then outlines a structured and legally grounded programme of reforms, from immediate actions such as clearer guidance to longer-term legislative change, aimed at supporting ecological recovery, improving consistency and efficiency, and enabling restoration

3. METHODS

The challenges and recommendations facing effective and efficient delivery of marine restoration activities set out in this report are grounded in a robust and multi-source evidence base from the following:

Literature review

A systematic review of academic research, policy documents and legislation was undertaken to identify existing challenges. These findings formed the starting point for further investigation through interviews, case studies and workshops.

Stakeholder interviews

A total of 11 formal interviews and 12 follow up conversations were conducted with practitioners, regulators, NGOs and academics to explore UK marine restoration policy challenges, identifying key issues including regulatory barriers, funding, data gaps and stakeholder inclusivity.

Case study development

Five case studies - four UK and one international (details in the full report) were used to provide practical, evidence-based examples that support the case for reform and show that proportionate solutions are achievable. The case studies cover different geographies, habitats and jurisdictions, illustrating how policy and licensing affect delivery, and highlighting challenges and successful reforms.

Workshops

An in-person workshop held in October 2025 with 35 stakeholders across practitioners, NGOs, regulators and academia, and a follow-up online focus group held in December 2025 with 15 targeted participants, gathered and refined insights on key restoration challenges and co-developed solution-based actions to inform the roadmap.

Policy Advisory Group engagement

A policy advisory group of UK governments, regulators, and delivery bodies including Defra, the Environment Agency, the Marine Management Organisation, Natural England, The Crown Estate, Nature Scot, and Natural Resources Wales provided input throughout to guide the project and provide technical advice.

Legal analysis

A legal review by the Lifescape Project identified practical legal mechanisms for reform based on workshop and focus group findings. The full legal analysis can be found in appendices of the full report.

Photo Lucie Machin,

4. CHALLENGES AND RECOMMENDATIONS

The following themes were identified representing the overarching challenges faced by marine restoration practitioners:

Key challenges:

- **Preservationist bias and feature-based paralysis**
- **Structural and jurisdictional fragmentation**
- **Prohibitive financial and administrative burdens**
- **Resource, capacity and expertise gaps**
- **Lack of proportionality**
- **Misalignment of legal mandates and policy goals**
- **Incompatibility of industrial licensing with ecological recovery**
- **Regulatory misclassification of restoration**

The following sections summarise the specific challenges under each theme along with key recommendations and proposed solutions. The tables accompanying each recommendation summarise a practical, phased set of actions, delivery mechanisms and responsible bodies.

The 'Timeline' gives an indication of the urgency of completion and likely timeframe for delivery depending on the level of legal reform required, from immediate actions to long-term:

- **Immediate** actions can be completed now under existing legal powers, with no new legislation required.
- **Short-term** actions for delivery within 12–24 months; may require a Statutory Instrument or substantive guidance.
- **Medium-term** actions fall within 2–5 years; may require either primary legislation or significant policy development.
- **Long-term** actions are for delivery beyond 5 years; require primary legislation or a Law Commission Reference.

The 'Who' column identifies the key bodies* with the legal authority and remit to deliver each action, but does not imply that these bodies currently have the resources, capacity or political conditions in place to do so. A Roadmap summarising all the challenges, actions and proposed timelines is presented in Section 6 of this report.

The themes and recommendations are presented in priority order, assessed using the following criteria: the scale of impact it would have on practitioners and ecological outcomes; speed at which an action can realistically be delivered; strength of practitioner views about which barriers most urgently need addressing; legal and administrative tractability of each reform; and the extent to which a reform unlocks progress on others. The result is an ordering that recognises that all eight themes are necessary and that none can be left to a later phase indefinitely.

Photo Theo Vickers

* Key statutory bodies: Defra, Environment Agency, Natural England, Marine Management Organisation (MMO), Joint Nature Conservation Commitee (JNCC), Ministry of Housing, Communities and Local Government (MHCLG), Welsh Government, Natural Resources Wales (NRW), Law Commission

Theme

Preservationist bias and feature-based paralysis

Photo Paul Adams

Challenge

Marine legislation tends to prioritise the protection of static, designated features over the restoration of dynamic, functioning ecosystems, which unintentionally constrain ecological recovery. While this feature-based approach is important, its rigid application can work against the broader ecological recovery that those designations were ultimately intended to support.

This is particularly evident in Marine Protected Areas (MPAs) where proposals to introduce or re-establish habitats may be resisted in order to 'preserve' the original feature habitats for which the site was designated, even where there is a strong ecological case. Regulatory frameworks can rely on fixed ecological baselines, requiring restoration to replicate historical conditions – at the time of designation - rather than support restoration of historic habitat extent or resilient, future-adapted ecosystems. This is further compounded by "shifting baseline syndrome", where progressively degraded conditions become accepted as normal (Pauly, 1995).

Regulatory processes within designated sites can also reinforce these challenges. Projects located within or near designated sites may require a Habitats Regulations Assessment (HRA), and where impacts cannot be ruled out, an Appropriate Assessment is triggered. This automatically classifies the project as complex under the marine licensing system, placing it in a higher, uncapped cost category, potentially deterring restoration in the areas where it is most needed. This is particularly problematic given that damaging activities may have continued within MPAs for several years due to the delay between designation and effective management measures being introduced, further increasing the need for active restoration. These factors contribute to a "suboptimal site" issue, where the most ecologically suitable locations are often the hardest to gain permissions for restoration activities. In practice, this can lead practitioners to select less effective sites to avoid regulatory cost and complexity, undermining the intended outcomes of protected area designations.

Recommendation

Move from feature-based to whole-site MPA protection and management.

Timeline	Action	Mechanism	Who
Immediate	SNCBs to revise site-specific conservation objectives for MPAs to include the re-establishment of historically present habitats and the recovery of overall ecosystem function*	Administrative – No legislative change	Natural England / NRW / JNCC (offshore)
Medium term	Review Habitats Regulations Assessment (HRA) procedures to determine whether restoration projects qualify as directly connected with or necessary to the management of a site within the National Site Network, removing the need for Appropriate Assessment.	Policy reform / SNCB engagement	Natural England / NRW / MMO
Long term	Amend regulation 63 of the Conservation of Habitats and Species Regulations 2017 to base Appropriate Assessment on whole-site integrity, and create a restoration-specific exemption for activities that contribute to overall site integrity.	Primary or significant secondary legislation	Defra / Welsh Government

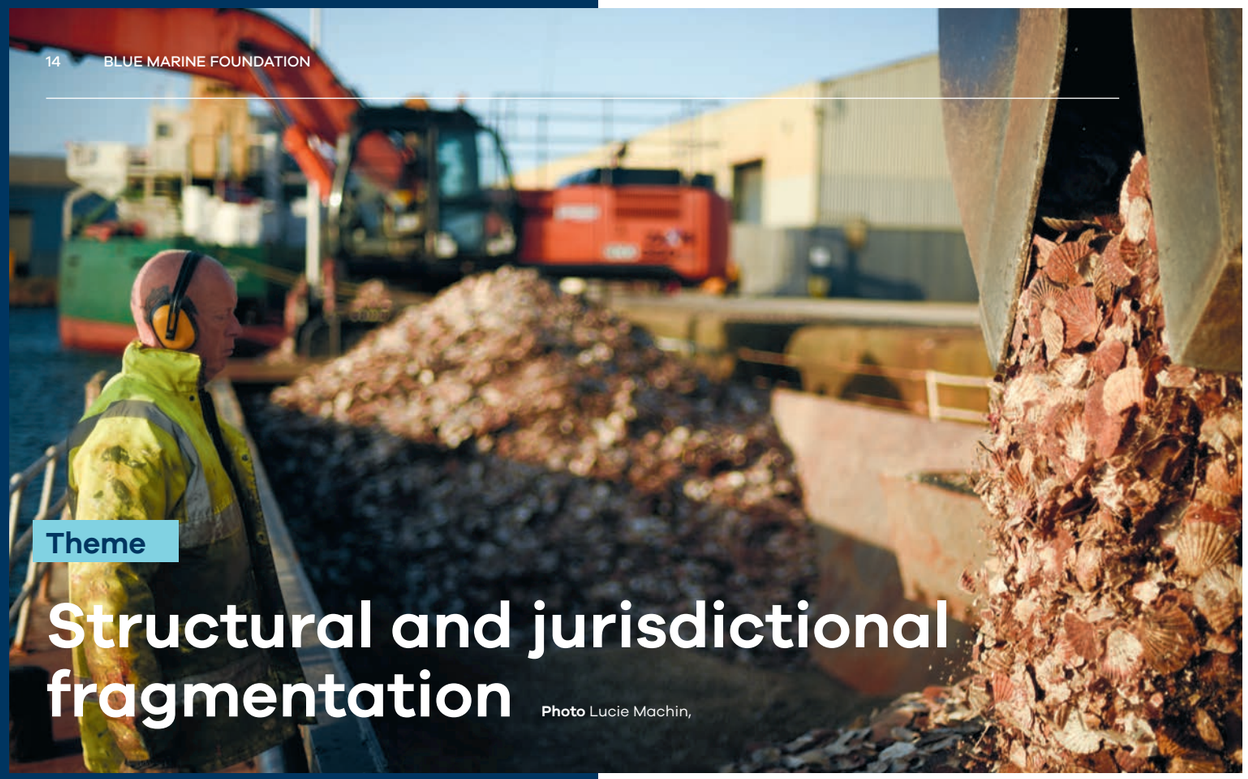
* Evidence suggests this goes beyond current Statutory Nature Conservation Body (SNCB) practice and would require Defra and Welsh Government to support an expansive interpretation of existing functions. The Lifescape Project legal review recommends regulatory amendment as set out in the Long-term action, but action can begin in the interim.

Photo RSPB Medmerry islands restoration

The proposed actions respond to the preservationist, feature-based constraints within the current system by enabling a shift towards whole-site and ecosystem-scale management of Marine Protected Areas. Statutory Nature Conservation Bodies (SNCBs) are responsible for setting conservation objectives for designated sites and with Defra and Welsh government support and regulatory amendments, would have the power to update site specific conservation objectives to include the re-establishment of historically present habitats, without the need to go through a legislative change. By updating conservation objectives for priority MPAs restoration would be treated as a legitimate mechanism for achieving site integrity and would enable decisions to be based on overall site integrity rather than individual features. In parallel, reviewing Habitats Regulations Assessment processes to recognise when restoration is directly connected to site management would reduce the need for full Appropriate Assessment for clearly beneficial activities, a factor which currently increases complexity and costs of licensing for restoration projects.

In the long term, amendments to Section 69 of the Marine and Coastal Access Act 2009 (MACAA) to require ecosystem-level assessment, or through a statutory definition of the ecosystem-based approach, would provide the legal framework needed to move away from rigid, feature-based checklists towards a more holistic assessment of environmental gain. Similarly, amending Regulation 63 of the Conservation of Habitats and Species Regulations 2017 to focus Appropriate Assessment on whole-site integrity, alongside introducing a restoration-specific exemption for activities that enhance overall site condition, would reduce unnecessary barriers, enable ecological recovery, and better align regulatory practice with long-term conservation objectives.

Photo Matt Jarvis



Theme

Structural and jurisdictional fragmentation

Photo Lucie Machin,

Challenge

The UK marine governance system is widely viewed as complex and fragmented, with responsibilities spread across multiple agencies operating under different mandates, jurisdictions, legal frameworks, and timescales. Evidence from the Environmental Audit Committee's 2025 report on Governing the Marine Environment (Environmental Audit Committee, June 2025) highlights how this lack of coordination creates siloed decision-making, undermining the joined-up approach needed for effective marine recovery. Research undertaken by the Marine Management Organisation (MMO) reinforced this evidence, with 40 per cent of survey respondents identifying the current licensing and regulatory process as a barrier to nature-based solutions, citing bureaucracy, delays, risk aversion, and limited expertise as the key factors (Risk & Policy Analysts Ltd and ABP Marine Environmental Research Ltd, Considerations of Nature Based Solutions in Marine Licensing, MMO1388, November 2025).

Practitioners face a "permission pile-up," needing multiple consents such as Marine Licences, Environmental Permits, Planning Permission in some instances, and seabed leases/ agreements, alongside further assessments such as Habitat Regulations Assessments, Marine Conservation Zone Assessments, and Water Framework Directive Compliance Assessments with bodies including the MMO, Environment Agency, Natural England, and The Crown Estate. Differing requirements under distinct legislative frameworks for each of these organisations can lead to duplication, conflicting advice, and increased costs. In addition, restoration applications are handled by case officers that lack specific expertise in marine restoration activities, further compounding inefficiencies. This legislative patchwork, combined with a lack of joined-up governance, is considered by many in the sector to create an administrative loop where one agency's requirement may appear to contradict another's advice, generating significant legal consultancy costs for practitioners operating across borders.

Recommendation

Streamline the current consenting process.

Timeline	Action	Mechanism	Who
Immediate	Strengthen and formalise the Coastal Concordat as a mandatory procedure and establish pre-application coordination across consenting and licensing authorities for multi-consent restoration projects.	Non-statutory guidance - No legislative change	Defra / MMO / Environment Agency / Natural England
Immediate	Create marine restoration licensing and consent guidance for practitioners including definitions of marine restoration activity, case studies, decision trees, and standard methods and conditions.	Non-statutory guidance – No legislative change	MMO / NRW / Defra / Welsh Government / Natural England
Short term	Create a unified digital consenting portal for marine restoration projects in England to coordinate advice across statutory bodies.	Administrative – No legislative change	MMO / Defra / Natural England / Environment Agency
Short term	Amend Town and Country Planning (General Permitted Development) (England) Order 2015 to create a new class of permitted development rights for defined marine restoration activities in the intertidal zone.	Secondary legislation - Statutory Instrument	MHCLG / Defra / Welsh Government
Long term	Seek a Ministerial Reference to the Law Commission for a review to align marine legislation and remove barriers to restoration.	Law Commission - Ministerial Reference	Defra / Welsh Government / Law Commission

The actions above propose a phased, practical approach to streamline marine restoration consenting, reflecting strong practitioner feedback that the current system is overly complex and fragmented. The Coastal Concordat in England provides an existing framework that aims to coordinate the decision-making process for project applications requiring multiple consents and permissions; however, this is currently voluntary and adoption is partial. Government could immediately improve and strengthen the Coastal Concordat by making coordinated pre-application processes across regulators a standard expectation for multi-consent projects. This does not require legislative change. Alongside the Coastal Concordat, a single digital consenting portal could be developed to coordinate advice across statutory bodies, with a lead case manager being appointed to resolve conflicting requirements.

Practitioners also highlighted the need for regulators to produce clear, practical guidance to facilitate marine licence applications, including definitions of restoration, standard methods, and decision tools. This type of guidance is non-statutory, meaning it is not legally binding and cannot change what the law means. Similar guidance has been completed by the MMO already for the Ports sector (MMO, 2026), which could be replicated for the restoration sector.

Research undertaken by the MMO highlighted that 40 per cent of survey respondents identified current licensing and regulatory process as a barrier to nature-based solutions.

Amending the Town and Country Planning (General Permitted Development) (England) Order 2015 could create permitted development rights for defined intertidal restoration activities. Although this would not remove the need for a marine licence, it would remove the need for a full planning application in the intertidal zone. However, it should be noted that any amendment to statutory definitions of "land" and "development" would require careful drafting to avoid unintended consequences beyond the marine sector.

For the most complex structural constraints, such as overlaps between marine and terrestrial law, interactions between key environmental regulations such as Habitats Regulations, Waste Regulations, and marine licensing, a more fundamental reform is required. The Law Commission provides a formal route ensuring the legal framework is coherent and fit for purpose. A Law Commission review of wildlife law from 2014 – 2015 in England and Wales made a series of recommendations which remain largely unimplemented but may be directly relevant to marine restoration and could be revisited. The 14th Programme of Law Reform was published in 2024 (Law Commission, 2025). The most realistic pathway for securing Law Commission involvement in marine restoration reform in the near term is through a Ministerial Reference. This would require a Government Minister to request a project on a specific legal issue outside the standard programme. The scale and importance of the issues provide a strong justification for taking this approach.

Photo Emma Nicol

Theme

Prohibitive financial and administrative burdens

Photo Matt Jarvis, Hamble saltmarsh restoration

Challenge

High financial and administrative burdens create a significant barrier to marine restoration, disproportionately affecting NGOs, academic institutions, and community-led projects. Licensing fees, particularly where projects trigger Appropriate Assessment, are uncapped and can represent a substantial portion of total project costs, introducing uncertainty and limiting project viability. These costs are compounded by extensive survey and assessment requirements, which are often applied irrespective of project scale or ecological benefit, alongside additional consultancy and monitoring expenses. During the interviews and in-person workshop that provided the evidence base for this report, practitioners felt that the marine licensing fees were one of the biggest challenges to restoration at scale. This concern has recently been raised directly with government in 2025, Dr Richard Unsworth of Project Seagrass, alongside 35 leading UK scientists, wrote an open letter to the Secretary of State describing England's current licensing regime as widely regarded as unpredictable, inconsistent, costly, and burdensome, treating restoration projects as if they damage rather than enhance the marine environment (Unsworth et al., 2025).

Significantly, the MMO's own research reaches similar conclusions, identifying marine licence application fees as a cited barrier to implementation of Nature Based Solutions (NBS) in coastal and marine environments, and recommending that a capped fee band for NBS applications be introduced to limit costs and remove the risk of revised fee estimates during the application process (MMO, 2025). The financial and administrative pressures on restoration projects create structural inequities within the system and restrict the delivery of restoration at the scale required.

Recommendation

Introduce a proportionate fee structure for nature positive restoration projects.

Timeline	Action	Mechanism	Who
Immediate	Introduce zero-fee, partially subsidised or capped-fee bands for nature-positive restoration projects based on existing legal powers under Marine Licensing (Fees) Regulations.	Policy decision – no legislative change required	Defra / Welsh Government
Short term	Amend Marine Licensing (Application Fees) Regulations 2014 by Statutory Instrument to introduce a permanent capped, partially subsidised, or zero-fee band for nature-positive restoration applications in MPAs, removing the automatic escalation to Band 3.	Statutory Instrument	Defra / Welsh Government

The proposed actions address the high financial and administrative burdens identified by introducing a more proportionate and accessible fee structure for restoration projects. Fee waivers and reductions can be achieved without legislative reform. Regulation 7 of The Marine Licensing (Application Fees) Regulations 2014, and Article 9 of The Public Bodies (Marine Management Organisation) (Fees) Order 2014, both permit fee waivers or reductions without further Treasury approval. A policy decision by Defra is therefore all that is required to introduce a zero-fee, partially subsidised or capped fee band for nature-positive restoration projects led by NGOs, academic institutions, or community groups. Given the strength of practitioner interest, this represents one of the most straightforward and impactful actions the Government could take in the short term. In England, amending the Marine Licensing (Application Fees)

Licensing fees, particularly where projects trigger Appropriate Assessment, are uncapped and can represent a substantial portion of total project costs.

Regulations 2014 to remove the automatic escalation to Band 3 for projects in Marine Protected Areas would also directly tackle the issue of disproportionately high fees in the most ecologically important locations. Parallel action in Wales would ensure consistency across jurisdictions, although this would require Ministerial involvement, a consultation and Statutory Instrument but would not require primary legislation.

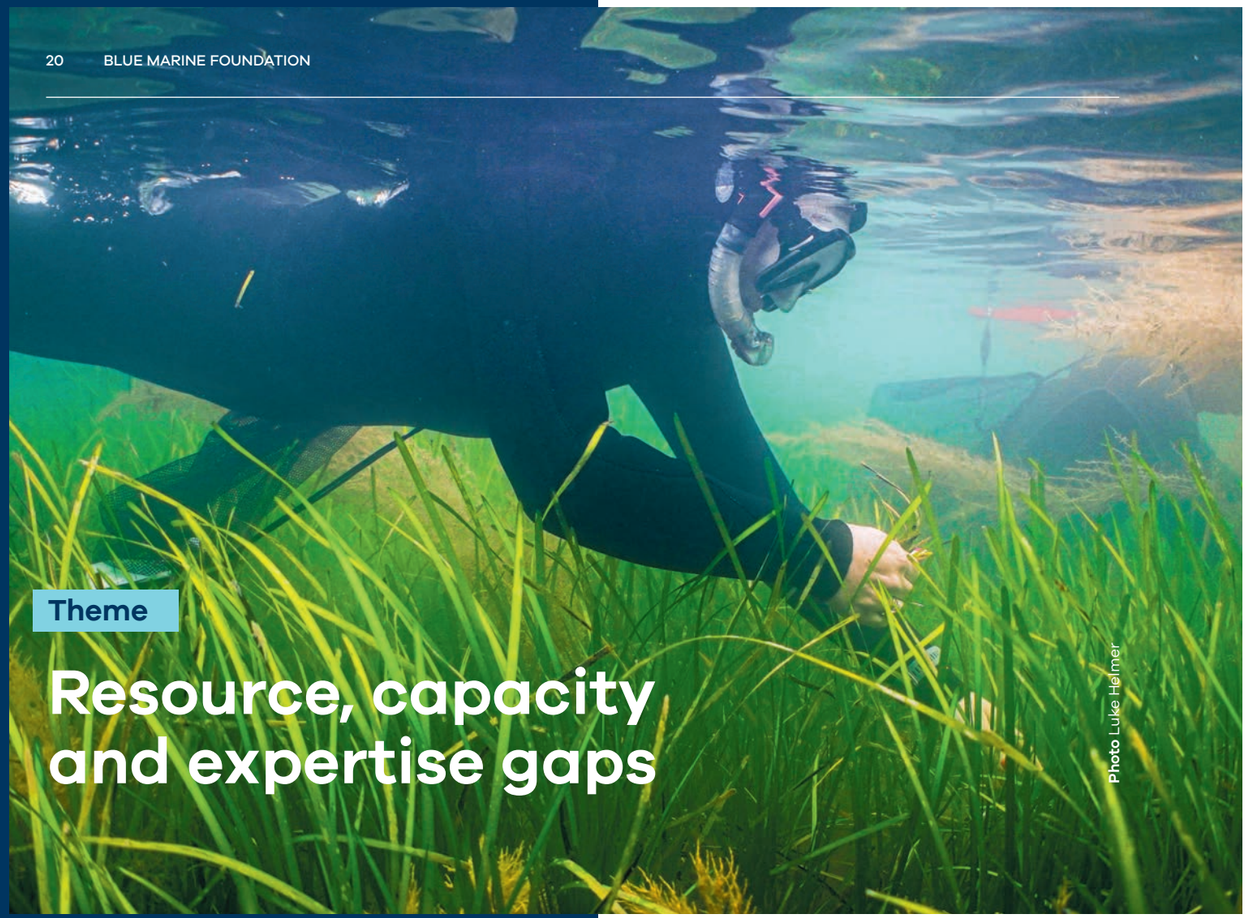


Photo Luke Helmer

Theme

Resource, capacity and expertise gaps

Challenge

A rapid increase in restoration activity has outpaced the capacity and specialist expertise of regulatory bodies, creating systemic bottlenecks in the licensing process. As a relatively new and technically complex field, restoration presents challenges that many regulators are not yet equipped to assess efficiently, contributing to delays, high costs, inconsistent decisions and an over-reliance on precaution. The absence of dedicated restoration leads, limited internal guidance, and constrained resources further weaken the ability of regulators to assess applications proportionately.

These capacity constraints reinforce wider process inefficiencies. A lack of clear, standardised guidance drives a recurring cycle of excessive data requests and over-designed surveys, increasing costs and delays without necessarily improving quality of decisions. At the same time, restoration practitioners have reported how long determination timelines fail to account for the seasonal nature of restoration, meaning projects frequently miss critical windows and lose funding. Staff shortages and turnover within regulator teams exacerbate this problem, causing delays to application timelines. Without targeted reform, including dedicated expertise, streamlined processes, and a regulatory framework tailored to restoration, these pressures are likely to intensify as restoration ambitions are scaled up.

Recommendation

Build regulatory ecological expertise, and extend the Corry Review's earned-autonomy framework to trusted marine restoration partners.

Timeline	Action	Mechanism	Who
Immediate	Create restoration coordinator roles, develop restoration desk notes guidance, and embed restoration ecology in training for statutory bodies.	Administrative	MMO / NRW / Natural England / NRW (SNCB role)
Immediate	Examine how the Corry Review's earned-autonomy framework could apply to marine restoration.	Administrative / inter-agency scoping	MMO / Natural England / NRW / NRW (SNCB role) / Defra
Short term	Establish a joint MMO-NRW-practitioner training programme and create a publicly accessible shared lessons repository of restoration project outcomes.	Administrative	MMO / NRW / Natural England / Practitioners
Medium term	Pilot the Trusted Provider framework on defined low-risk activities, then extend based on pilot outcomes, allowing trusted partners to deliver pre-vetted restoration activities.	Policy / Memoranda of Understanding / class licences	MMO / Natural England / NRW / NRW (SNCB role) / trusted partners

To overcome the resource and expertise gaps within the current licensing system, dedicated restoration capacity within regulatory bodies and clearer, more consistent pathways for decision-making must be created.

Establishing restoration coordinator roles across government agencies and SNCBs involved in licensing (MMO, Natural England, Natural Resources Wales), alongside targeted guidance and training, would strengthen in-house expertise and improve the quality and consistency of assessments. Two existing precedents already operate this model: the Environment Agency's Nature Permitting and Coordination service (launched January 2026), which provides nature projects with a single point of contact across multiple Environment Agency permits, and Scotland's commitment to a dedicated restoration support post under its Marine and Coastal Restoration Plan (December 2025). Both models should be considered for adaptation to marine licensing in England and Wales.

Developing joint regulator and practitioner training on licence applications and processing, and a shared, publicly accessible evidence base would reduce repeated information requests and improve knowledge transfer across projects.

Scoping and piloting the Corry Review's earned-autonomy framework in the marine environment would enable trusted partners with demonstrated competence to deliver low-risk restoration activities through streamlined processes, such as organisations operating under Memoranda of Understanding or class licences, with reduced case-by-case regulatory oversight in exchange for documented protocols and ongoing performance accountability. This would reduce administrative burden while maintaining oversight.

Together, these measures would address capacity constraints both for regulators and practitioners, support more efficient regulatory processes, and create a more enabling system for scaling restoration.

Developing joint regulator and practitioner training on licence applications and processing, and a shared, publicly accessible evidence base would reduce repeated information requests and improve knowledge transfer across projects.

Photo NOSY Creative Agency

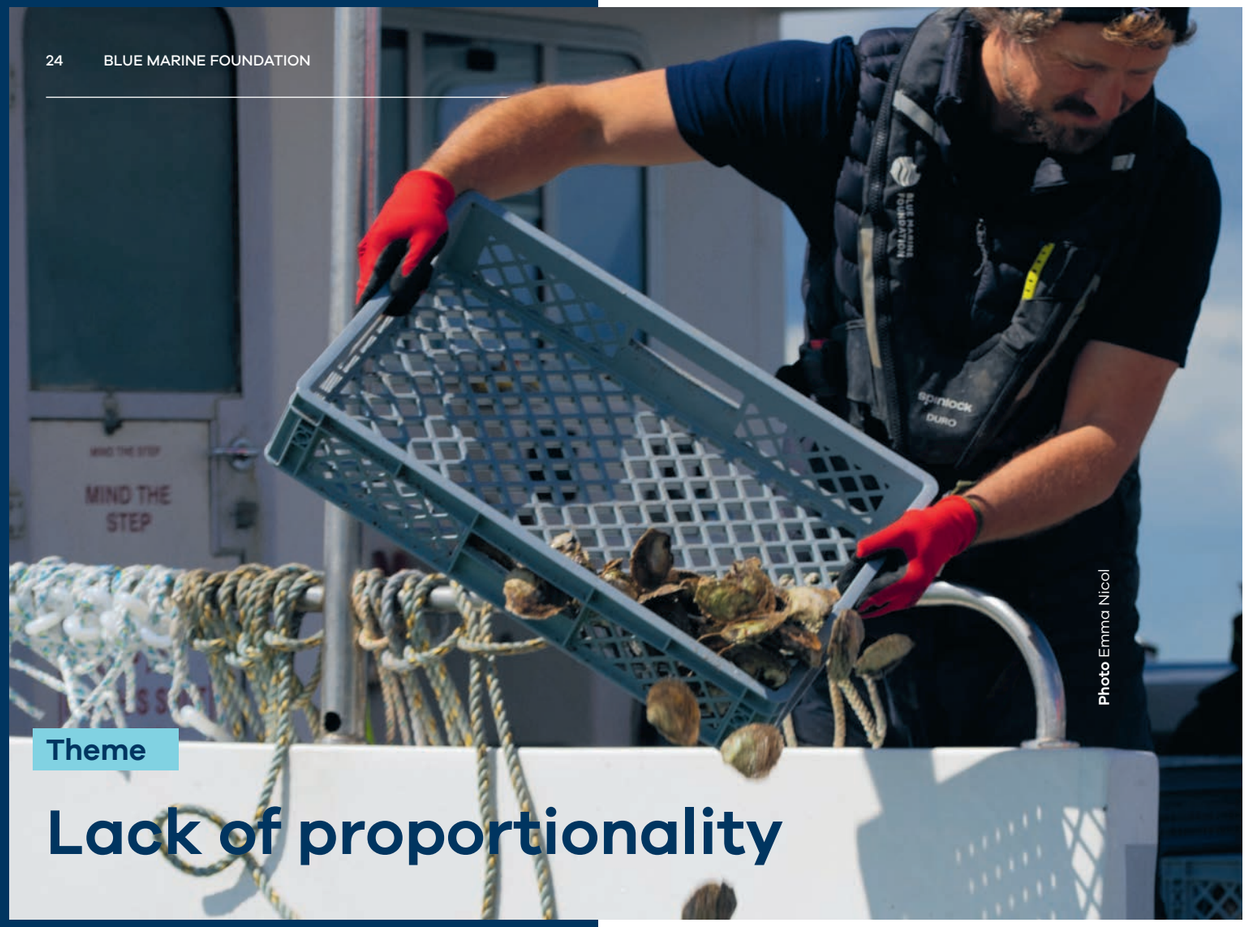


Photo Emma Nicol

Theme

Lack of proportionality

Challenge

The current application of the Precautionary Principle creates a structural barrier to marine restoration by prioritising the avoidance of short-term, often low-impact disturbance over long-term ecological recovery, and by requiring a level of certainty that is difficult to achieve when using relatively novel restoration techniques. The MMO's own guidance confirms that the Precautionary Principle is applied when making licensing decisions where scientific certainty is lacking, preventing that uncertainty from being used as a reason to postpone measures to prevent environmental harm (MMO, Make a Marine Licence Application, GOV.UK). While this is rightly applied as a necessary safeguard against genuinely harmful activities with no environmental gain, its application with equal force to ecological restoration activities whose purpose is environmental improvement, is considered by many in the sector to produce a significant regulatory mismatch. There is a disproportionate burden on restoration projects with this approach which leads to delayed trials, constrained innovation, and a regulatory 'catch-22' in which evidence cannot be generated without prior approval. As a result, there is growing recognition, including within MMO research, of the need for a more pragmatic approach that accepts a degree of uncertainty and risk in restoration decision-making. Reviews of the UK regulatory system, including the Corry Review (Corry, D. 2025), highlight the need for a more proportionate, outcomes-focused approach that simplifies processes and enables restoration, while maintaining appropriate environmental protections.

Recommendation

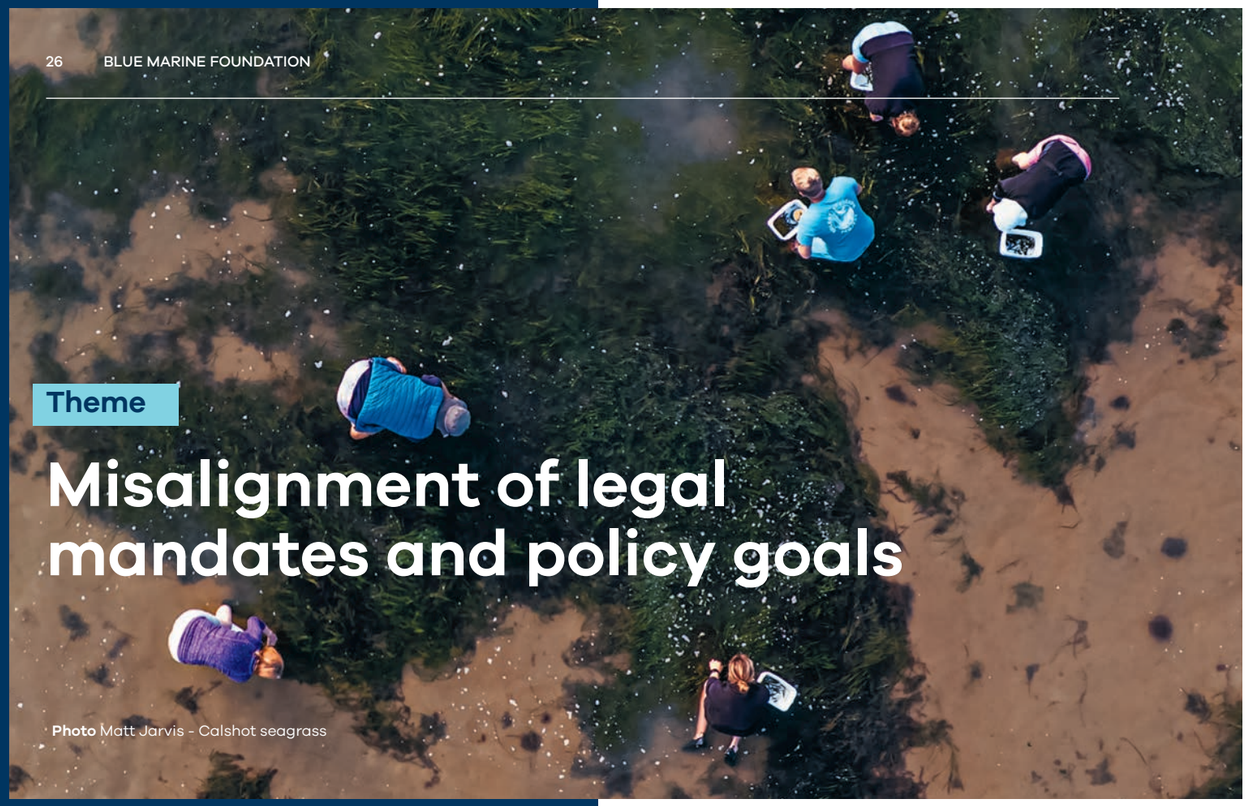
Apply a proportionality test that distinguishes restoration from extractive activity and create 'Restoration Sandboxes' to trial new techniques.

Timeline	Action	Mechanism	Who
Immediate	Develop guidance for statutory bodies on a proportionality test for restoration, incorporating the ecological cost of inaction, and applying a lower certainty threshold for environmental gain.	Statutory and non-statutory guidance	Defra / Welsh Government / MMO / NRW
Medium term	Establish pre-approved zones (Restoration Sandbox Zones) where novel techniques can be trialled under streamlined approval, with shared monitoring data protocols.	Policy / administrative framework	MMO / NRW / Defra / Welsh Government
Medium term	Amend standard licence templates to include adaptive management conditions, allowing specified licence parameters to be adjusted in response to monitoring data.	Policy / licence template reform / statutory guidance	MMO / NRW

The proposed actions respond directly to the precautionary, risk-averse approach that currently prioritises short-term certainty over long-term ecological recovery and constrains innovation. Statutory guidance issued by Defra or the MMO could clarify how the Precautionary Principle should be applied to restoration projects compared to extractive or infrastructure developments, ensuring that evidence requirements are calibrated to the scale, purpose and ecological benefit of the activity.

Establishing (Restoration Sandboxes) would provide a structured pathway for trialling novel techniques under streamlined approval processes, directly addressing the current barrier to generating evidence in practice. In parallel, updating standard licence templates to include adaptive management conditions would allow projects to evolve in response to monitoring data without requiring full re-consenting. Together, these actions reduce the evidential burden on early-stage projects, enable learning by doing, and create a more proportionate and flexible framework that supports restoration at scale while maintaining appropriate environmental safeguards.

There is growing recognition of the need for a more pragmatic approach that accepts a degree of uncertainty and risk in restoration decision-making.



Theme

Misalignment of legal mandates and policy goals

Photo Matt Jarvis - Calshot seagrass

Challenge

There is a clear mismatch between the UK's high-level commitments to nature recovery and the legal framework that governs day-to-day regulatory decisions. While policy commitments such as 30 x 30 and improving the condition of MPAs set clear direction, they are not underpinned by a statutory duty on regulators to facilitate restoration. As a result, the system remains focused on preventing environmental harm rather than enabling recovery, creating a mismatch between strong policy intent without the mechanisms needed to deliver it.

As highlighted by The Wildlife Trusts, the Office for Environmental Protection has warned that without significant change, key targets including 30x30 will not be met (Wildlife Trusts, 2025).

This misalignment is reinforced by supporting policies that lack operational weight in licensing decisions, meaning restoration is not consistently prioritised. At the same time, short-term permitting structures are poorly aligned with the long timescales required for ecosystem recovery, creating uncertainty and discouraging investment.

The system lacks practical tools to support restoration at scale, the system lacks practical tools to support restoration at scale: pilot projects are drawn into full regulatory processes, limiting innovation, and the absence of a Marine Net Gain framework means there is no consistent requirement for development to deliver measurable benefits for nature. Existing funding approaches also tend to focus on mitigating damage rather than driving proactive recovery. These issues create a system that struggles to translate policy ambition into practical delivery, limiting the UK's ability to meet its restoration commitments.

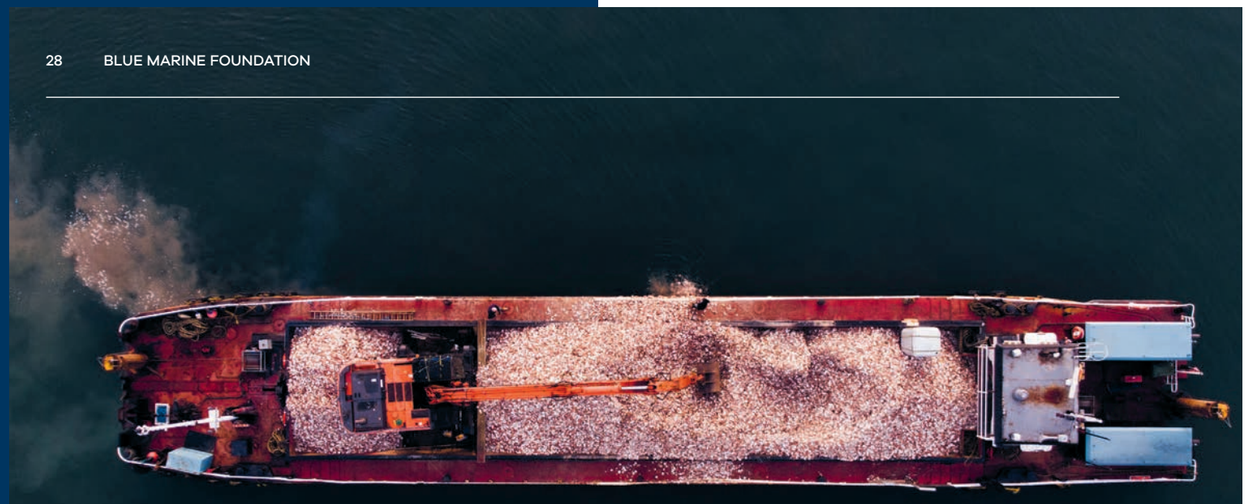
Recommendation

Place a statutory duty on regulators to actively enable marine ecosystem recovery.

Timeline	Action	Mechanism	Who
Immediate	Issue joint guidance clarifying how biodiversity and climate policies in English marine plans should be applied in restoration licence determinations. NRW to develop equivalent guidance for the Welsh National Marine Plan.	Non-statutory joint guidance	MMO / Environment Agency / Natural England / NRW
Short term	Extend licence durations for habitat establishment; trial decade-long authorisations tied to ecological milestones rather than administrative timelines.	Policy / licence condition reform	MMO / NRW
Medium term	Accelerate the development of Marine Net Gain so restoration contributes to net gain obligations.	Policy / secondary legislation	Defra / Natural England / Welsh Government / NRW
Long term	Amend the Marine and Coastal Access Act through primary legislation to introduce a statutory duty to protect, restore and enhance the marine environment - drafted as a new Section 2A modelled on Section 3 of the Marine (Scotland) Act 2010, using "must secure" rather than "have regard to" for maximum legal weight.	Primary legislation	Defra / Welsh Government

The proposed actions address the gap between policy ambition and delivery of restoration projects by improving guidance, extending regulatory timeframes, and embedding restoration in legal frameworks. Joint guidance would clarify how biodiversity and climate policies apply to licensing decisions and improve coordination across permits. Longer licences and milestone-based authorisations would better reflect ecological timescales and support delivery. Introducing a Marine Net Gain framework would help incentivise restoration and ensure development contributes positively to nature.

At a structural level, introducing a statutory duty to "protect, restore, and enhance" the marine environment would represent a significant shift. This could be achieved through amendments to the Marine and Coastal Access Act 2009 to insert a general environmental enhancement duty, for example a new Section 2A - applying across all functions, or a specific duty within Section 69 governing licence determination. The strength of this duty would be critical, with a "must secure" formulation providing a stronger and more effective legal driver than a weaker "have regard to" approach, and bringing marine regulation more closely in line with the terrestrial biodiversity net gain requirements already in force under the Environment Act 2021.



Theme

Incompatibility of industrial licensing with ecological recovery

Photo Lucie Machin, Native oyster restoration work

Challenge

Marine licensing systems were largely designed to regulate extractive or construction activities, creating a fundamental mismatch when applied to ecological restoration. Evidence from MMO analysis of 62 restoration-related licence applications (2018–2024) shows that key barriers include cost, long timescales, high information requirements, limited case team capacity, and the cumulative burden of EIA, HRA, and MCZ assessments. Restoration activities such as deploying oyster cultch or seagrass are legally classified as depositing articles on the seabed under Part 4 of the Marine and Coastal Access Act 2009, meaning there is no guaranteed access to proportionate or streamlined pathways. Most restoration projects are therefore unable to benefit from exemptions or self-service licensing, which is often easier, cheaper, and quicker.

The system is further complicated by requirements such as Environmental Impact Assessment (EIA) screening. Although the Marine Works (Environmental Impact Assessment) Regulations 2007 (as amended), requires an applicant to determine whether a full assessment is required, the process itself often requires substantial baseline data, meaning, in the view of many practitioners, the burden of demonstrating that an EIA is not needed can be comparable to completing one. This contributes to delays and uncertainty for practitioners.

More broadly, there is a recognised lack of proportionality in the system. Low-risk, high-benefit restoration projects including small-scale and community-led initiatives often face the same regulatory requirements as large commercial developments. Both regulators and practitioners highlight this as a significant gap, with opportunities to introduce targeted exemptions, expand self-service licensing, or create streamlined approval pathways for nature-based restoration activities to support delivery at scale.

Recommendation

Develop a regulatory framework designed to support low risk restoration.

Timeline	Action	Mechanism	Who
Immediate	Establish a simplified Environmental Impact Assessment (EIA) route for low-risk marine restoration projects, using evidence relevant to scale and impact of activity instead of industrial development level evidence.	Guidance - No legislative change	Defra / MMO / NRW / Welsh Government
Immediate	Defra and MMO to engage actively with the Environmental Outcomes Reports design process, ensuring that proportionate screening, outcomes-based assessment for ecological gain, and adaptive management for restoration are reflected in the EOR framework as it applies to marine and coastal projects.	Engagement with statutory consultation	Defra / MHCLG / MMO / Environment Agency / Natural England
Short term	Amend the Marine Licensing (Exempted Activities) Order 2011 by Statutory Instrument, adding defined low-risk restoration techniques to the list of exempted activities.	Secondary legislation – Statutory Instrument	Defra
Medium term	Amend Marine and Coastal Access Act to introduce a deemed licence or prior notification registration scheme with 28-day objection window. Include Article 4-style mechanism allowing MMO and NRW to disapply streamlined process in particularly sensitive areas.	Primary or secondary legislation	Defra / Welsh Government / MMO / NRW
Long term	Amend Part 4 of the Marine and Coastal Access Act to create a bespoke Marine Licence tier.	Primary legislation	Defra/ Welsh Government

The proposed actions respond to the mismatch between existing marine licensing systems and the needs of restoration projects by establishing a more proportionate, risk-based framework while maintaining appropriate environmental safeguards. Central to this is simplifying assessment requirements within the marine licensing process and expanding access to streamlined pathways for low-risk, nature-based solutions (MMO, 2025).

The EIA framework is now in transition. The Government's response to the consultation on Environmental Outcomes Reports (EORs), published on 13 March 2026 (Ministry of Housing, Communities and Local Government, 2026), confirms that EORs will replace the EU-derived Environmental Impact Assessment, Strategic Environmental Assessment and Sustainability Appraisal regimes. Established under the Levelling-up and Regeneration Act 2023, EORs will be

introduced through secondary legislation following a two-year transition period. The design principles set out in the response, including proportionate reporting against defined outcomes, a more focused screening process, an adaptive approach to uncertainty, and outcomes-based assessment, align closely with the principles this report applies to restoration. The reforms therefore provide an opportunity to embed restoration-specific provisions from the outset, rather than amend an already finalised framework. The limited window before EOR regulations are finalised is a crucial moment to shape how environmental assessment will address marine restoration in future.

The most immediate and practical reform is to expand exemptions under the Marine Licensing (Exempted Activities) Order 2011, using powers under Section 74 of the Marine and Coastal Access Act 2009 (MACAA). This would allow clearly defined low-risk restoration techniques - such as seagrass hand-seeding and small-scale shellfish substrate introduction - to proceed without requiring a marine licence, subject to thresholds, conditions, and notification requirements. This approach has already been demonstrated in Wales through the Marine Licensing (Exempted Activities) (Wales) (Amendment) Order 2026, which added seagrass restoration to the exempted activities list. Carefully defining the scope of exemptions will be critical to avoid unintended deregulation of higher-risk activities.

Building on this, further efficiencies could be delivered through an amendment to MACAA to introduce a deemed licence or prior notification scheme. Under this model, qualifying restoration projects could proceed automatically unless the MMO objects within a defined period (e.g. 28 days). An Article 4-style mechanism could be used to disapply this streamlined route in sensitive areas, ensuring safeguards are maintained while enabling faster delivery for the majority of low-risk activities.

For more durable, long-term reform, amending Part 4 of MACAA to create a distinct Marine Restoration Licence would provide a dedicated statutory framework that clearly differentiates restoration from development and extraction. This would embed proportionality within the licensing regime, reduce friction for nature-positive projects, provide greater legal certainty to support private investment in blue carbon and natural capital markets, and align regulatory practice with the UK's biodiversity commitments.

Photo Lucie Machin

Theme

Regulatory misclassification of restoration

Photo Matt Jarvis

Challenge

Regulations designed to protect the environment from pollution can, in some circumstances, act as unintended barriers to ecological enhancement. Waste Regulations requirements and Water Framework Directive Compliance Assessments are among the assessments that sit alongside marine licence applications and contribute to the complexity, cost and time associated with restoration projects. Natural restoration materials such as oyster shells and seagrass seed bags are classified as 'waste products' under the Waste Regulations 2011 if they are perceived as being discarded, triggering Environmental Permitting requirements that are disproportionate to the ecological risk and intended benefit of restoration activities.

Practitioners often highlight the need to undergo a declassification process by demonstrating beneficial use. This can be a complex and time-consuming process leading to delays, added costs, and uncertainty. In parallel, restoration projects that involve physical modification of the seabed may be required to demonstrate compliance with Water Framework Directive standards, creating a high evidential threshold for activities designed to improve environmental condition. Together, these frameworks can result in restoration being regulated as a potential source of harm rather than a mechanism for ecological enhancement.

Recommendation

Classify natural restoration materials appropriately and assess restoration under the Water Framework Directive (WFD) as a beneficial ecological activity.

Timeline	Action	Mechanism	Who
Immediate	Issue Regulatory Position Statements for defined low-risk restoration materials (including natural shell, locally collected sediment, and seagrass seed bags), subject to specified conditions.	Regulatory Position Statement	Environment Agency / NRW
Immediate	Develop guidance for statutory bodies to assess restoration projects by their ecological purpose, weighing temporary disturbance against long term ecological benefits.	Non-statutory joint guidance	Environment Agency / NRW / MMO
Short term	Amend Schedule 2 of the Environmental Permitting (England and Wales) Regulations 2016 to create a low-risk restoration materials exemption.	Statutory Instrument	Defra / Welsh Government
Short term	Develop and issue Standard Rules permits for defined low-risk restoration techniques, replacing bespoke assessments with pre-defined ecological protocols.	Standard Rules Permit framework under the EPR 2016	Environment Agency / NRW

The proposed actions address the misclassification of restoration materials and the lack of a proportional assessment. The Environment Agency has the power to issue Regulatory Position Statements (RPS) for defined low-risk materials, allowing projects to proceed under specified conditions without triggering disproportionate permitting requirements. It does not change the underlying law and can be withdrawn but it provides immediate practical relief for practitioners working with low-risk restoration materials such as cleaned native oyster shells or locally sourced sediment. It is the fastest available mechanism for decoupling restoration from waste regulation while longer-term statutory exemptions are developed.

Complementary joint guidance from the Environment Agency, MMO and NRW would ensure that statutory bodies assess restoration activities based on their ecological purpose, weighing short-term disturbances against long-term environmental benefit. This type of guidance is non-statutory, meaning it is not legally binding and can therefore be delivered relatively quickly.

Legislative amendments could be made to Schedule 2 of the Environmental Permitting (England and Wales) Regulations 2016 to create a specific low-risk restoration materials exemption, modelled on existing agricultural waste-spreading exemptions.

This would provide a more durable solution to the waste misclassification problem than an RPS alone however it does require consultation and a Statutory Instrument but not primary legislation. In addition, the Environment Agency could develop and issue Standard Rules permits for defined low-risk restoration techniques, replacing bespoke assessments with pre-defined ecological protocols. This would establish consistent, pre-defined approval processes, reducing uncertainty, delays, and administrative burden. Together, these measures would provide a more proportionate and coherent framework that recognises restoration as a beneficial activity and supports its delivery at scale.

Natural restoration

Natural restoration materials such as oyster shells and seagrass seed bags are classified as 'waste products' under the Waste Regulations 2011 if they are perceived as being discarded, triggering Environmental Permitting requirements that are disproportionate to the ecological risk and intended benefit of restoration activities.

Photo: Robert McCourt

5. **NEXT STEPS**

The findings of this report evidence that the current regulatory system in England and Wales is not designed to effectively enable marine restoration and is the primary barrier to delivery at scale. Without urgent reform, the UK will struggle to meet its biodiversity and climate commitments.

The reform agenda set out in this report is grounded in existing legal mechanisms, with many actions in the Roadmap, particularly the Immediate actions, deliverable using powers already held by governments and their agencies. The next stage is to test how these mechanisms can be applied in practice and to identify how longer-term legislative reforms can be realistically progressed. In parallel, each theme of the Roadmap will be explored further with government, regulators and the wider restoration sector, and we welcome engagement from all stakeholders involved in and supporting marine habitat recovery to ensure that the regulatory framework supports, rather than hinders, marine restoration.

Immediate action is needed to shift from a system that manages environmental harm to one that actively enables ecological recovery. Blue Marine calls for practitioners, regulators, and Governments to work together to action the recommendations set out in this Roadmap, ensuring a more proportionate, enabling approach to restoration is achieved.

Photo Matt Jarvis

Roadmap

This roadmap sets out a sequenced programme of reform across the eight themes identified in the report. Each row describes a specific challenge, the action required to address it, the legislative or administrative mechanism through which the action would be delivered, and the principal bodies responsible for delivery. Note that naming a body in the "Who" column does not imply that the body necessarily has the funds, capacity, resources, time, ministerial sign-off, or political appetite to deliver the action at any given moment. This roadmap is organised by recommendation priority and within each theme, rows run by timescale; Immediate, Short-term (12-24 months), Medium-term (2-5 years), Long-term (5 years +). It is focused primarily on England, with specific actions noted where they are directly relevant to Wales. Scotland operates outside the scope of this Roadmap.

Priority 1 - Theme:

Preservationist Bias and Feature-Based Paralysis

Recommendation:

Move from feature-based to whole-site MPA protection and management.

Timescale	Challenge	Action	Mechanism	Who
Immediate	Conservation objectives fixed around current designated features rather than historical ecology or whole-ecosystem function	**[England and Wales]** SNCBs to revise site-specific conservation objectives for MPAs to include the re-establishment of historically present habitats and the recovery of overall ecosystem function. Evidence suggests this goes beyond current SNCB practice and would require Defra and Welsh Government to support an expansive interpretation of existing functions. The Lifescape Project legal review recommends regulatory amendment (set out in the Long-term action below) but action can begin in the interim.	Administrative — revised conservation objectives	Natural England / NRW (SNCB role) / JNCC (offshore)
Medium-term	Restoration blocked in MPAs by automatic Band 3 escalation; Appropriate Assessment required even for clearly beneficial activities	**[England and Wales]** Review HRA procedures with Natural England and NRW (SNCB role) to determine whether restoration projects qualify as directly connected with or necessary to the management of a National Site Network site, removing the need for Appropriate Assessment.	Policy reform / SNCB engagement	Natural England / NRW (SNCB role) / MMO / NRW
Long-term	Conservation objectives fixed around current designated features rather than historical ecology or whole-ecosystem function; legal test under Regulation 63 of the Habitats Regulations remains feature-by-feature	**[England and Wales]** Amend regulation 63 of the Conservation of Habitats and Species Regulations 2017 to base Appropriate Assessment on whole-site integrity, and create a restoration-specific exemption for activities that contribute to overall site integrity, including those re-establishing historically present habitats or habitat-forming species, conditioned on scientific evidence of net ecological benefit.	Primary or significant secondary legislation	Defra / Welsh Government

Priority 2 - Theme:
Structural and Jurisdictional Fragmentation

Recommendation:
Streamline the current consenting process.

Timescale	Challenge	Action	Mechanism	Who
Immediate	Multiple agencies issuing conflicting advice with no coordinated pre-application response	**[England and Wales]** Strengthen and formalise the Coastal Concordat as a mandatory procedural standard through Ministerial direction; establish statutory pre-application coordination stage for restoration projects.	Ministerial direction / non-statutory guidance	Defra / MMO / Environment Agency / Natural England
Immediate	Practitioners face complex multi-consent processes with no consolidated reference resource on how to navigate the marine restoration consenting and licensing system	**[England and Wales]** MMO and NRW to develop marine restoration licensing and consent guidance for practitioners, including definition of marine restoration activity, case studies, decision trees, and standard methods and conditions; model on the MMO's Ports Sandbox Top Tips guidance and equivalent Offshore Wind guidance.	Non-statutory practitioner guidance	MMO / NRW / Defra / Welsh Government / Natural England
Short-term	No single consenting portal; practitioners navigating multiple systems across multiple agencies	**[England]** MMO to establish unified digital front door for restoration applications in England; designate lead case manager to reconcile conflicting statutory advice internally across statutory bodies.	Administrative / digital infrastructure	MMO / Defra / Natural England / Environment Agency
Short-term	Intertidal zone subject to overlapping and conflicting terrestrial and marine planning requirements	**[England and Wales]** Amend Town and Country Planning (General Permitted Development) (England) Order 2015 to create a new class of permitted development rights for defined marine restoration activities in the intertidal zone. Welsh Government to consider parallel amendment to the equivalent Welsh planning regulations.	Statutory Instrument	MHCLG / Defra / Welsh Government
Long-term	Deep structural conflicts between marine and terrestrial law in the intertidal zone cannot be resolved through piecemeal amendment	**[England and Wales]** Defra to seek a Ministerial Reference to the Law Commission for a comprehensive review of the overlap between marine and terrestrial environmental law, covering MACAA, TCPA, EPR, and Habitats Regulations interactions, with the aim of producing draft legislation that resolves the structural conflicts these statutes create for marine restoration. Engagement with the Scottish Government and DAERA would be essential to ensure that solutions are compatible with the legal frameworks operating in Scotland and Northern Ireland and that cross-border projects are addressed.	Law Commission Ministerial Reference	Defra / Welsh Government / Law Commission (with consultation of Scottish Government and DAERA)

Priority 3 - Theme:
Prohibitive Financial and Administrative Burdens

Recommendation:
Introduce a proportionate fee structure for nature positive restoration projects.

Timescale	Challenge	Action	Mechanism	Who
Immediate	Licensing fees exclude community-led and NGO-led restoration projects	**[England and Wales]** Defra to introduce zero-fee, partially subsidised or capped-fee band for nature-positive restoration projects, prioritising NGOs, academia and community-led projects for which current fees represent a significant share of project budget. Legal powers already exist under regulation 7 Marine Licensing (Application Fees) Regulations 2014 and article 9 Public Bodies (MMO) (Fees) Order 2014. Welsh Government to consider parallel action under the Marine Licensing (Fees) (Wales) Regulations 2017.	Policy decision — no legislative change required	Defra / Welsh Government
Short-term	No capped fee band for restoration applications in MPAs; Band 3 automatically triggered by Appropriate Assessment	**[England]** Defra to amend Marine Licensing (Application Fees) Regulations 2014 by Statutory Instrument to introduce a capped, partially subsidised or zero-fee band for nature-positive restoration applications in MPAs, removing the automatic escalation to Band 3 that currently penalises projects in the most ecologically valuable locations. Welsh Government to consider parallel amendment to the Marine Licensing (Fees) (Wales) Regulations 2017.	Statutory Instrument	Defra / Welsh Government

Priority 4 - Theme:
Resource, Capacity and Expertise Gaps

Recommendation:
Build regulatory ecological expertise, and extend the Corry Review's earned-autonomy framework to trusted marine restoration partners.

Timescale	Challenge	Action	Mechanism	Who
Immediate	No specialist restoration expertise within MMO/NRW case teams; no dedicated lead	**[England and Wales]** Create restoration coordinator roles within MMO, NRW, and SNCBs; develop restoration desk notes guidance for case officers; embed restoration ecology in induction and ongoing training. Two existing precedents already operate this model: the Environment Agency's Nature Permitting and Coordination service (launched January 2026), which provides nature projects with a single point of contact across multiple Environment Agency permits, and Scotland's commitment to a dedicated restoration support post under its Marine and Coastal Restoration Plan (December 2025). Both models should be considered for adaptation to marine licensing in England and Wales	Administrative decision	MMO / NRW / Natural England / NRW (SNCB role)
Immediate	Earned-autonomy framework from Corry Review not yet applied to marine restoration; no scoping work to identify how trusted-partner model could be extended to marine context	**[England and Wales]** MMO, Natural England, and NRW to scope how the Corry Review's earned-autonomy framework could apply to marine restoration, drawing on the live Natural England / National Trust pilot in the Peak District and Devon.	Administrative / inter-agency scoping	MMO / Natural England / NRW / NRW (SNCB role) / Defra
Short-term	Recurring Request for Further Information loops; no shared evidence base across projects	**[England and Wales]** MMO and NRW to establish joint MMO-NRW-practitioner training programme; create publicly accessible shared lessons repository of restoration project outcomes. Scotland's Marine and Coastal Restoration Plan commits to a one-stop-shop for guidance and knowledge exchange, which offers a further model.	Administrative / partnership	MMO / NRW / Natural England / Practitioners
Medium-term	Corry earned-autonomy framework scoped (Immediate) but not yet operationalised in marine context	**[England and Wales]** Pilot the framework with one or two trusted marine restoration partners on defined low-risk activities, then extend on the basis of pilot outcomes — allowing trusted partners to deliver pre-vetted restoration activities without case-by-case assessment. Use Memoranda of Understanding and class licences as proposed by the Corry Review.	Policy / Memoranda of Understanding / class licences	MMO / Natural England / NRW / NRW (SNCB role) / trusted partners

Priority 5 - Theme:
Lack of Proportionality Approach

Recommendation
Apply a proportionality test that distinguishes restoration from extractive activity and create 'Restoration Sandboxes' to trial new techniques.

Timescale	Challenge	Action	Mechanism	Who
Immediate	Blanket application of Precautionary Principle to low-risk restoration without equivalent scrutiny of the cost of inaction	**[England and Wales]** Defra and MMO to develop guidance on a proportionality test for restoration, weighing the ecological cost of inaction, and applying a lower certainty threshold for environmental gain; distinguish restoration from extractive development in precautionary principle guidance. Welsh Government and NRW to consider parallel guidance for Wales.	Statutory and non-statutory guidance	Defra / Welsh Government / MMO / NRW
Medium-term	No formal pathway for trial or pilot projects; evidence cannot be generated without prior approval	**[England and Wales]** MMO to establish Restoration Sandbox Zones (pre-approved zones where novel techniques can be trialled under streamlined approval, with shared monitoring data protocols); introduce Permit to Pilot framework. NRW to consider equivalent Welsh Restoration Sandbox Zones.	Policy / administrative framework	MMO / NRW / Defra / Welsh Government
Medium-term	Marine licences are issued as fixed consents, with Section 72 variation mechanisms under MACAA underused as a means of accommodating new evidence from adaptive management	**[England and Wales]** MMO and NRW to amend standard licence templates to include adaptive management conditions as a default provision for restoration applications, allowing specified licence parameters to be adjusted in response to monitoring data without requiring full re-application; issue statutory guidance clarifying how Section 72 variations should be used.	Policy / licence template reform / statutory guidance	MMO / NRW

Priority 6 - Theme:
Misalignment of Legal Mandates and Policy Goals

Recommendation
Place a statutory duty on regulators to actively enable marine ecosystem recovery.

Timescale	Challenge	Action	Mechanism	Who
Immediate	Marine plan policies supporting restoration not given operational weight in licensing decisions	**[England and Wales]** MMO and Environment Agency to issue joint guidance clarifying how biodiversity and climate policies in the English marine plans should be applied in restoration licence determinations; NRW to develop equivalent guidance for the Welsh National Marine Plan; clarify regulator lead roles where multiple permits are required.	Non-statutory joint guidance	MMO / Environment Agency / NE / NRW
Short-term	Short-term permits fundamentally misaligned with ecological recovery timescales	**[England and Wales]** MMO to extend standard licence durations for habitat establishment; trial decade-long authorisations tied to ecological milestones rather than administrative timelines. NRW to consider equivalent reform of Welsh marine licensing.	Policy / licence condition reform	MMO / NRW
Medium-term	No Marine Net Gain framework is in place, despite the precedent set by terrestrial Biodiversity Net Gain under the Environment Act 2021	**[England]** Defra to accelerate the development and implementation of a Marine Net Gain framework for English waters, integrating marine restoration as a recognised delivery mechanism for net gain obligations and ensuring alignment with the existing marine licensing framework. Welsh Government to consider parallel development of a Welsh Marine Net Gain framework.	Policy / secondary legislation	Defra / Natural England / Welsh Government / NRW
Long-term	Regulators have no statutory mandate to facilitate recovery — only to prevent harm	**[England and Wales]** Amend MACAA through primary legislation to introduce a statutory duty to protect, restore and enhance the marine environment — drafted as a new Section 2A modelled on Section 3 of the Marine (Scotland) Act 2010, using “must secure” rather than “have regard to” for maximum legal weight. The Marine (Scotland) Act 2010 already contains a duty to protect and enhance the marine natural environment, providing a domestic precedent for equivalent reform in England and Wales.	Primary legislation	Defra / Welsh Government

Priority 7 - Theme:
Incompatibility of Industrial Licensing with Ecological Recovery

Recommendation
Develop a regulatory framework designed to support low risk restoration.

Timescale	Challenge	Action	Mechanism	Who
Immediate	EIA screening under the Marine Works (Environmental Impact Assessment) Regulations 2007 is a chargeable service, and the evidence required to demonstrate that a project does not warrant a full EIA can itself be nearly as burdensome as the assessment it seeks to avoid	**[England and Wales]** MMO to issue guidance establishing a simplified screening pathway for defined low-risk restoration techniques, setting out the evidence standard proportionate to the activity rather than requiring industrial-development-equivalent baseline data; publish a technique-specific screening checklist that allows qualifying projects to complete screening on the basis of reference evidence rather than bespoke surveys. NRW to consider parallel guidance under the Marine Works (Environmental Impact Assessment) (Wales) Regulations 2007.	Policy / non-statutory guidance	MMO / NRW / Defra / Welsh Government
Immediate	The Government's Roadmap for Environmental Outcomes Reports (March 2026) confirms a new domestic framework will replace EIA, SEA, and Sustainability Appraisal by the end of 2027, with the first phase of consultation on outcomes and guidance presenting the most consequential window for restoration-specific principles to be embedded in the new framework.	**[England]** Defra and MMO to engage actively with the Environmental Outcomes Reports design process, ensuring that proportionate screening, outcomes-based assessment for ecological gain, and adaptive management for restoration are reflected in the EOR framework as it applies to marine and coastal projects.	Engagement with statutory consultation	Defra / MHCLG / MMO / Environment Agency / Natural England
Short-term	Low-risk restoration classified and processed identically to industrial development	**[England]** Defra to amend Marine Licensing (Exempted Activities) Order 2011 under s.74 MACAA: add defined low-risk techniques including seagrass hand-seeding, small-scale shellfish substrate introduction, and equivalent activities, with size thresholds, method conditions, and notification requirements. Wales has already achieved this for seagrass through the Marine Licensing (Exempted Activities) (Wales) (Amendment) Order 2026 (in force 1 April 2026), which serves as a direct legislative model for England.	Statutory Instrument	Defra
Medium-term	No automatic approval pathway for qualifying restoration projects; every application treated as a full licence	**[England and Wales]** Amend MACAA to introduce a deemed licence or prior notification registration scheme with 28-day objection window; include Article 4-style mechanism allowing MMO and NRW to disapply streamlined process in particularly sensitive areas.	Primary or secondary legislation	Defra / Welsh Government / MMO / NRW
Long-term	No legal distinction between restoration and industrial construction or extraction in primary legislation	**[England and Wales]** Amend Part 4 of MACAA through primary legislation to create a bespoke Marine Restoration Licence tier, legally distinguishing restoration from development and extraction; define "marine restoration activity" in statute with sufficient precision to prevent misuse.	Primary legislation	Defra / Welsh Government

Priority 8 - Theme:
Regulatory Misclassification of Restoration

Recommendation
Classify natural restoration materials appropriately and assess restoration under the Water Framework Directive (WFD) as a beneficial ecological activity.

Timescale	Challenge	Action	Mechanism	Who
Immediate	Natural restoration materials classified as waste, triggering Environmental Permitting Regulations	**[England and Wales]** Environment Agency to issue Regulatory Position Statements confirming non-enforcement for defined low-risk restoration materials — cleaned oyster shells, locally sourced sediment, seagrass seed bags — subject to specified conditions. NRW to consider parallel RPS-equivalent action in Wales.	Regulatory Position Statement — no legislative change required	Environment Agency / NRW
Immediate	Water Framework Directive compliance assessments treat physical modifications for restoration identically to those for extractive or industrial activity, creating a high evidential bar for projects intended to improve water body status	**[England and Wales]** Environment Agency and MMO to issue joint guidance ensuring that restoration projects are assessed on the basis of their ecological purpose, weighing temporary disturbance during delivery against the lasting ecological benefit the project is designed to deliver. NRW to develop equivalent guidance for Welsh waters.	Non-statutory joint guidance	Environment Agency / NRW / MMO
Short-term	No durable statutory solution to waste misclassification of restoration materials	**[England and Wales]** Defra to amend Schedule 2 of the Environmental Permitting (England and Wales) Regulations 2016 to create a specific low-risk restoration materials exemption, modelled on existing agricultural waste-spreading exemptions. The 2016 Regulations apply across both jurisdictions; Welsh Government engagement is required.	Statutory Instrument	Defra / Welsh Government
Short-term	Common restoration techniques that do not qualify for a statutory exemption are processed through bespoke Environmental Permit applications	**[England and Wales]** Environment Agency to develop and issue Standard Rules permits for defined low-risk restoration techniques, replacing bespoke assessments with pre-defined ecological protocols. NRW to issue parallel Standard Rules permits in Wales.	Standard Rules Permit framework under the EPR 2016	Environment Agency / NRW

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