

ASCOBANS 14th North Sea Group

Implementation Review: UK

March 2025 – April 2026

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Joint Nature Conservation Committee

Identify the priority bycatch issues and relevant stakeholders (RES-01)



- Work continues under the **UK Bycatch Mitigation Initiative (2022)** which lays out how the UK intends to minimise, and where possible, eliminate the bycatch of marine species. Working towards country implementation plans.
- Defra are developing a **bycatch risk prioritisation framework** with Cefas, ZSL & JNCC to support prioritisation of bycatch mitigation and monitoring.
- The **UK Bycatch Monitoring Programme** continues to operate on board observers monitoring marine mammal bycatch to provide estimates and identify high-risk gear types in UK fisheries.
- Projects under **Clean Catch** to support BMI explore options for improving monitoring and coverage:
 - Clean Catch UK self-reporting app formally launched in November 2025

Improve estimates of bycatch rates to support development of conservation strategy (RES-02)



- The **UK Bycatch Monitoring Programme** continues to operate on board observers monitoring marine mammal bycatch. And is looking to explore sampling designs, data collection protocols and assess the potential use of alternative data sources (e.g. bycatch self-reporting app, Cefas observer programme) + undertake a SWOT analysis on REM as a bycatch monitoring tool.
- iVMS devices** for under-12 m fishing vessels – mandatory in England since May 2025, consulting in Scotland.
- Data collection via **Cetacean Strandings Investigations Programme** and **Scottish Marine Animal Stranding Scheme** continue.
- OSPAR-commissioned ICES WKMAMBY will produce updated bycatch estimates for the OSPAR area to feed into the next indicator assessment update for **M6 marine mammal bycatch**. Data workshop April 2026. Finalisation workshop June 2026

Implement and assess pinger and other mitigation measures to reduce bycatch (MIT-01)



- **Management measures to reduce the impact of fishing activities on harbour porpoise within Southern North Sea SAC** are progressing through an assessment led by the Marine Management Organisation.
 - Consultation on proposed measures in the SNS and Bristol Channel Approaches SAC is ongoing.
- **Continued mitigation trials** under the Clean Catch 2 programme in the SW of England (potential knock-on benefits for the North Sea area):
 - Fishtek 'Banana Pinger' – 9 active skippers across four locations; as of December 2025, self-reported data for 449 control hauls and 344 pinger hauls for 6 skippers. Local Focus Group help in November 2025 and wildlife licence for use of pingers renewed for 2026.
 - Passive Acoustic Reflectors – partnership and design schematics have been shared. Co-design with skippers in Cornwall completed. PAR floats and pearls testing planned for early 2026.
- **Continued retained regulations for the requirement for ADD's** on all vessels over 12 metres using bottom set and entanglement nets in ICES Area IV (Greater North Sea) with mesh size \geq 220mm or with any mesh size if the net is 400m or less.

Implement a wide-scale surveillance programme to monitor trends in distribution and abundance in the Greater North Sea (MON-01)



- **POSEIDON project** is ongoing, carrying out a gap analysis to identify low coverage areas and completed aerial surveys across England and Wales (incl. North Sea). Close to conclusion now and testing the tool.
- Continued support for the **JCDP** as a mechanism for collating standardised cetacean observation data and make them accessible for relevant analyses.
- **The UK Cetacean Conservation Strategy** published December 2025 recommendation:
 - Building the evidence base through coordinated scientific research and monitoring to improve understanding of the conservation status of cetaceans in UK waters.
- **SCANSV** planned for 2027.
- **Collaboration between ORCA and JNCC** on a pilot programme aiming to collect data to address identified gaps for cetaceans in UK waters by utilising ORCA's highly trained and experienced marine mammal surveyors on existing seaborne platforms.
- **Habitats Regulations Reporting**, summarising current understanding of distribution and abundance published January 2026.

Improve understanding of causes of seasonal and annual variation in abundance and distribution, in relation to human activities & environmental change



- Rolling update to the **Marine Climate Change Impacts Partnership (MCCIP) marine mammal report**; last reviewed late 2024 but no significant amendments.
- **The UK Cetacean Conservation Strategy** (published December 2025) aims to better deliver effective monitoring. Climate change impacts being considered throughout development of recommendations/actions.
- **ECOWind PELAgIO project** looks to explore impacts of offshore wind developments across all levels of the food chain and predicted changes across a range of scenarios. Project will model impacts of OWF on behaviour and distribution of both predators and prey, with and without the influence of climate change.
- **ORCA and JNCC pilot programme** aims to target seasons where monitoring is currently limited.
- **POSEIDON** project.

Further our understanding of population structure (RES-04)



- Exploring the potential for the **provision of dead bycaught animals for population structure assessment** (licenses and further engagement required to achieve this)
- Analysis of the **long-finned pilot whale MSE 2023 event** looked at identifying familial relationships within the pod.

Monitoring of health and nutritional status, diet, life history parameters, and causes of mortality (MON-02)



- **Long-term strandings data collection** via Cetacean Strandings Investigations Programme and Scottish Marine Animal Stranding Scheme which both produce annual reports.
- **Analysis of long-finned pilot whale MSE 2023** event published on Marine Directorate website.
- **The UK Cetacean Conservation Strategy** published December 2025 recommendation:
 - Improve understanding of supporting habitats and prey availability to cetaceans to improve management and conservation.

Improve understanding of and develop mitigation for the risks of anthropogenic sound (MIT-02)



- **The UK Cetacean Conservation Strategy** published December 2025 recommendation:
 - Manage underwater noise at levels that do not adversely affect cetacean populations.
- **Guidance + protocol updates** – new guidelines and position statements, including for UXO, explosive use and piling; new approach for piling protocols.
- **Projects** – ECOWind PELAgIO project, PrePARED, POSEIDON
- **Suite of programmes** looking to better understand the impact and mitigation of offshore wind
 - Offshore Wind Environmental Evidence Register
 - Offshore Wind Evidence and Change Programme
 - OWEER Gap Analysis and Reprioritisation
 - Offshore Wind Enabling Actions Programme
 - Offshore Wind Evidence and Knowledge Hub
- **Marine Noise Registry** – phase 3 live in May 2025; funding secured for phase 4 development; data used for UKMS Impulsive Noise Indicator

Ensure screening and assessment of the occurrence and effects of hazardous substances (MON-03)



- Pollutants in small cetaceans are monitored through a **collaboration between CSIP, SMASS and Cefas**.
- OSPAR Candidate Indicator on **Trends and Status of Persistent Chemicals in Marine Mammals (M7)** is due to be a Common Indicator for the next Intermediate Assessment in 2029.
- The UK collect and assess data on PCBs in harbour porpoise as part of a broad indicator tracking exposure of wildlife to chemicals within the Outcome Indicator Framework for the **25 Year Environment Plan H4 Indicator**
- The UK Cetacean Conservation Strategy** published December 2025 recommendation:
 - Improve understanding of the impacts of hazardous substances, marine litter and biotoxins on cetaceans.

Monitor for potential increases in anthropogenic activities that lead to incidences of death, injury or adverse health effects (MON-04)



- Provisions within the **strandings programmes** to, where possible, extract samples to analyse for impacts of noise however, there is often limited opportunity due to specific and time-bound requirements of extracting viable samples.
- Analysis of long-finned pilot whale MSE 2023** event published on Marine Directorate website.
- The **UK Marine Noise Registry** for impulsive noise for use in analyses for operations producing noise. The MNR collects temporospatial data on noisy activities to pressure on the environment.
- PAM monitoring programmes** looking at the possibility of significant displacement of marine mammals (particularly harbour porpoise and dolphins) due to construction activities of wind farms on the east coast of Scotland

Monitor habitat quality, including protected sites, to ensure management is effective and that the ecological functions are maintained (MON-05)



- **The UK Cetacean Conservation Strategy** published December 2025 recommendation:
 - Improve understanding of supporting habitats and prey availability to cetaceans to improve management and conservation.
- Habitat reporting under **UKMS Descriptors & UK Habitats Regulations**
- JNCC, Natural England and NatureScot are responsible for monitoring MPA habitats & species in the North Sea and provide advice on the condition of and vulnerability of MPAs to inform on management.
- The **Offshore Wind Environmental Evidence Register (OWEER)** collates evidence gaps to support further research and development to improve understanding of marine species that may be affected by offshore developments. E.g the effect of prey and habitat loss (seabed impacts) on harbour porpoise
- The UK **manages online portals aiming to map out marine activities and pressures**, providing spatial information on physical habitat change, aggregated fishing effort, vessel traffic and abrasion