

# Strengthening research, monitoring, and conservation of cetaceans and seals in UK waters | POLICY BRIEFING NOTE



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## PURPOSE

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Whales, dolphins, porpoises and seals play key roles in UK marine ecosystems and have significant cultural - and often economic - value to coastal communities. Confidence in their conservation status underpins effective marine management, supporting fisheries management, marine spatial planning, statutory marine reporting, international obligations, and public trust.

Based on the newly-published [UK Marine Mammal Forum \(UKMMF\) landscape analysis](#), the UK's marine mammal evidence base is strong but fragmented.

The analysis highlights opportunities to improve coordination of existing monitoring and research—rather than creating new programmes—to strengthen national understanding of the ecological importance and public value of cetaceans and seals as highly charismatic species, while supporting proportionate policy delivery.

This policy note complements the analysis and is intended to support strategic discussion and coordination across UK and devolved administrations, particularly in relation to delivery of the UK Cetacean Conservation Strategy and related marine policy. It does not assess individual projects or recommend specific regulatory actions.

## KEY MESSAGES FOR POLICYMAKERS

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Better coordination of existing marine mammal evidence, through collaboration with industries such as offshore wind and fishing, can support proportionate delivery of UK and devolved fisheries and marine conservation objectives.

### **Strong foundations already exist**

The UK has a long-established marine mammal evidence base delivered by statutory bodies, academia, NGOs, citizen scientists and industry partners.

### **Clearer evidence pathways would improve confidence**

Increasing visibility of how data move from collection through analysis to use in management would strengthen assurance in conservation status assessments.

### **The fishing industry are already part of the solution**

Fishermen contribute through bycatch monitoring, mitigation trials, co-designed research and data collection. This engagement is effective but often project-specific rather than coordinated at scale.

### **Citizen science is essential**

Volunteer-led monitoring underpins many long-term datasets used in national and international reporting and is a core component of the evidence base.

### **Coordination is the primary challenge**

Delivery of Recommendation 6 of the UK Cetacean Conservation Strategy is constrained primarily by the need for improved coordination and integration of existing evidence, rather than additional monitoring effort.

### **The UK-wide Marine Mammal Forum presents a coordination solution**

A UK Marine Mammal Forum would provide a proportionate, light-touch vehicle for coordination and convening, complementing existing statutory roles and monitoring programmes

## POLICY CONTEXT: EVIDENCE-BUILDING FOR CETACEANS AND SEALS

This briefing is directly relevant to High-level Recommendation 6 of the [UK Cetacean Conservation Strategy](#), which calls for:

*“Building the evidence base through coordinated scientific research and monitoring to improve understanding of the conservation status of cetaceans in UK waters.”*

While the Strategy focuses on cetaceans, the evidence-building challenges it identifies - population-scale data gaps, uneven spatial coverage, and the need for coordination across pressures - apply equally to seals. Both groups are subject to cumulative pressures and rely on shared monitoring, reporting and analytical pathways.

Recommendation 6 recognises that, despite extensive monitoring and research activity, confidence in population-level assessments can be limited, particularly for offshore regions, mobile species and less-studied populations. It emphasises integration and coordination of evidence, rather than siloed monitoring for individual pressures, as central to effective delivery.

The UKMMF landscape analysis provides a system-level view of how current activity aligns with this objective.

### EXAMPLE OF INDUSTRY COLLABORATION AND TRANSFERABLE LEARNING: FISHERIES

The UKMMF landscape analysis shows that the fishing industry already contributes to marine mammal research and monitoring, including bycatch reporting, mitigation trials, co-designed research and data collection using fisheries platforms.

There is a strong opportunity to build on existing fisheries–science collaboration to improve evidence coherence, support proportionate management and align conservation delivery with sustainable fisheries objectives. This approach supports the Joint Fisheries Statement, the UK Marine Strategy and devolved fisheries and marine evidence frameworks, and aligns with priorities for coastal growth, including the Fishing and Coastal Growth Fund.



### WHY THIS MATTERS FOR FISHERIES:

The fishing industry is already contributing to marine mammal monitoring. Scaling this engagement nationally would strengthen evidence, build trust, and support effective conservation delivery alongside sustainable fisheries and coastal growth.

## IMPLICATIONS FOR DELIVERY OF RECOMMENDATION 6 OF THE UK CETACEAN CONSERVATION STRATEGY

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Overall, the findings indicate that the primary challenge identified in Recommendation 6 of the UK Cetacean Conservation Strategy is not insufficient activity, but insufficient coordination across existing evidence streams.

In particular:

- Local and regional monitoring generates essential data, but pathways for scaling these data to population-level assessments are often unclear.
- Offshore regions and wide-ranging species remain comparatively data-poor.
- Strong evidence bases do not always translate transparently into management tools, mitigation pathways or policy assurance.

Addressing these issues is central to improving confidence in conservation status assessments and meeting national and international obligations.

## SUPPORTING COORDINATION AND EVIDENCE SHARING

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In this context, the UKMMF would provide a low-cost, enabling mechanism to support delivery of Recommendation 6 for both cetaceans and seals.

The UKMMF project database:

- improves visibility of who is collecting evidence, where and for what purpose;
- highlights gaps, overlaps and fragmentation in monitoring and research effort;
- supports strategic discussion on how existing activity contributes to population-level understanding.

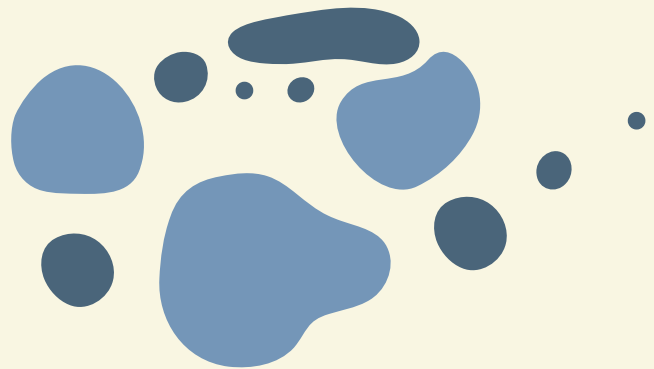
## CONCLUSION

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The UKMMF landscape analysis demonstrates the value of an integrated, multi-method approach to cetacean and seal monitoring in UK waters. While individual datasets have limitations, their combined interpretation provides a robust evidence base to support current policy commitments.

Continued development of the UKMMF can play a key enabling role in delivering clearer evidence pathways, improved standardisation, stronger fisheries engagement, and closer policy integration to support effective marine mammal conservation under UK and international obligations.

Improved coordination of existing marine mammal evidence would support effective, proportionate and UK-wide delivery of marine conservation and sustainable fisheries objectives.



## SOURCE

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This briefing draws on the UK Marine Mammal Forum project database and landscape analysis prepared by Mindfully Wired as part of the UKMMF set-up phase, which was funded by The Fishmongers' Company. For further information, please contact Dr Hannah Trayford [hannah.trayford@mindfullywired.org](mailto:hannah.trayford@mindfullywired.org).