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# Councils in Partnership: A local authority perspective on Marine Spatial Planning

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## ABSTRACT

Many studies have shown that effective stakeholder engagement, including local communities, is vital for the success of any marine planning project. In the UK, local authorities can play a vital, if often overlooked, role in building bridges between developers, academics and local communities. They can facilitate knowledge exchange and co-operation, using their local understanding of the economic, social and ecological make-up of an area. Thus, Highland Council and Orkney Islands Council are using a mix of traditional terrestrial planning techniques and innovative marine approaches to enable, support and engage stakeholders. Examples include sub-station applications, harbour upgrades, marine spatial planning, master-planning and business and community engagement. The local authorities are therefore pivotal in helping to address the complex challenge of marine energy developments in the north of Scotland.

## INTRODUCTION

Marine spatial planning relies on an interdisciplinary approach to managing both space and marine users to minimize conflict and identify opportunities. Thus, approaches that integrate natural and social science perspectives for defining and managing places at sea are necessary to implement ecosystem based management [1]. In addition, many studies have shown that effective stakeholder engagement, including local communities, is vital for the success of any marine planning project [2, 3, 4, 5, 6, 7].

In the UK, local authorities can play a vital, if often overlooked, role in building bridges between developers, academics and local communities, thereby facilitating knowledge exchange and co-operation. Their local knowledge of both the geography and demography of areas experiencing burgeoning marine growth can prove invaluable, particularly for engaging local stakeholders. They can also form a vital enabling role e.g. investing in associated infrastructure such as pier renewal and developing the master-planning required to support marine development.

The rapid growth of marine spatial planning issues in the Pentland Firth and Orkney Waters is largely driven by wave and tidal energy projects. Thus, the north of Scotland is an area under clear development pressure from new marine activities [8]. This region is bound by Highland (Caithness and Sutherland north coasts) on the mainland and the circa 70 islands that are collectively known as Orkney. Highland supports around 233,000 people, many living within a few kilometres of its 4,900 km coastline [9]. In contrast, Orkney has a population of 21,530 within its coastline of around 1,000 km [10, 11]. As a significant local employer in the area, both the Highland Council and Orkney Islands Council understand the economic, social and ecological value of their coastal and marine environments. They are therefore taking a very proactive approach to facilitating sustainable marine development in this area, as discussed below.

## METHODOLOGY

The two local authorities are using a mix of traditional terrestrial planning techniques and innovative marine approaches to support, enable and engage stakeholders. They are also building up their own areas of expertise in this relatively new development arena. By tapping in to local knowledge, the councils are ideally placed to assist in resolving conflicts between traditional and emerging activities. Thus, by committing staff time, expertise and funding, effective progress is being made in this challenging field.

## OUTPUTS

Largely through the planning economic development and marine services departments, Orkney Islands Council and Highland Council are delivering a variety of outputs to support, enable and engage in marine energy development (see Table 1). Both councils provide input at both licencing (devices) and planning (sub-stations) stages of offshore renewable development applications and support supply chain initiatives. They participate actively in pre-application stages, offering a key link for integrating terrestrial and marine planning phases, thus helping to minimise potential delays at an early stage. They have also lobbied extensively for upgrading of the areas transmission grid system and new subsea connections. Other examples of support include the world-leading EMEC wave and tidal device test site, of which Orkney Islands

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Council is a part owner. Highland Council has supported regeneration partnerships to encourage new employment opportunities and prepared harbour development protocols.

Orkney Islands Council, with its direct governance structure in relation to ports, has made significant investment in harbour upgrades at Lyness, Hatston and Stromness. Along side this, its vessel traffic system had been extended to cover all of the Pentland Firth and Orkney Waters to enable growth of all marine industries. In Highland, enabling projects include a public 'call for sites' exercise in Caithness. This encouraged the public to suggest land for development to support, among other things, lay-down and supply chain sites for offshore renewables.

**Table 1: Examples of Highland Council & Orkney Islands Council activities to support the marine renewables sector.**

| Support | Enable | Engage |
|---|---|---|
| • EMEC<br>• Local/Master-planning<br>• Key consultees<br>• PFOW Marine Energy Park<br>• Enterprise Areas | • Harbour upgrades<br>• On-shore sub-station applications<br>• Marine Spatial Plans<br>• Land purchase | • Workshops<br>• Info Days<br>• Plan Consultations<br>• Leadership Fora & working groups<br>• Lobbying |

Another fundamental part of this work is their partnership both with each other and with Marine Scotland, in developing a pilot marine spatial plan for the Pentland Firth and Orkney Waters. This project aims to provide a sound policy framework for multiple marine sectors, thereby minimising risk and supporting sustainable development of both businesses and local communities. A number of pre-planning stages and consultations have been completed to provide a sound evidence base, scope the future policy requirements and gather local knowledge to inform the next stage, the draft plan. It is anticipated that the level of local stakeholder participation and involvement to date has encouraged ownership of the plan and helped build trust between the various competing sectors and the local community (see [2]). The final plan will then be taken forward in due course in the form of individual marine plans for Orkney and for North Highland respectively. In addition, it will deliver a framework for regional marine spatial planning throughout Scotland and provide the necessary evaluation of the pilot process (see [12, 13]).

The councils play a key role in numerous networks of business, environmental and social organisations and fora. Both staff and councillors can therefore bridge the gap with local communities, keeping them informed of developments along their coastline. As local people generally understand the roles local authorities play, they know how to engage with them e.g. through local councillors and consultation events. However, given marine spatial planning is still relatively new, this is not so readily the case as no single lead organisation is currently identified for regional planning in Scotland. Thus, active local authority involvement is vital. It ensures local people therefore have numerous opportunities to shape their coastal communities by contributing to both local development plans and regional marine plans. Indeed, the level of success of these plans is dependent on effective community engagement, as recognized by other European marine spatial planning initiatives as referenced in the introduction above.

The councils do recognize that supporting marine renewable developments to full deployment is a protracted process, especially given the level of marine, coastal and terrestrial integration required and the challenges this presents [14, 15]. Continued Professional Development training on marine spatial planning has therefore been developed by Highland Council staff to aid terrestrial planners across several local authorities in addressing these challenges. In line with most agencies, the support offered is however limited by staff resources. The planning procedures have been streamlined where possible by making use of a detailed pre-application advice service.

Local authorities are also best placed to manage community expectation of marine developments, particularly linked to community benefit. Policy support is progressing in this area but delivery may be some years ahead whilst technologies and project are still evolving.

## CONCLUSIONS

A local authority perspective is provided to show how councils are facilitating marine spatial planning at a regional level in Scotland. Whilst it is a significant challenge in this relatively new field of planning, Highland & Orkney Islands Councils are successfully engaging at an early stage to ensure they provide support for both local commerce and communities. Working closely together, they provide guidance and support on integrating terrestrial and marine planning, enable significant economic support in the form of harbour upgrades and land supply and facilitate local engagement opportunities, to name but a few examples. The role of local authorities is therefore pivotal in relation to providing links between marine developers and local communities to ensure successful outcomes for sustainable marine development.

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