

Policy Brief from workshop proceedings

TALKING HEADS: SCIENCE-POLICY COLLABORATION FOR SHARED SUSTAINABILITY AMBITIONS



This Scottish Universities Insight Institute (SUII) and MASTS project examined **the role of the ocean, policy coherence and science-policy collaboration to accelerate progress towards a sustainable economy and society** in Scotland. This is set within the global context of the UN Agenda 2030 and the Sustainable Development Goals (SDGs), the UN Decade of Ocean Science for Sustainable Development, the UNFCCC¹ COP 26 in Glasgow and the CBD² COP 15 in Kunming, as well as ‘building back better’ in our recovery from the COVID-19 pandemic.

Our events enabled dialogue across diverse science and policy communities in Scotland, deliberately reaching beyond overtly ‘marine’ policy strands, to:

- Develop our understanding of interdependencies between marine and cross-cutting policy themes to promote policy coherence, developing synergies and managing trade-offs.
- Mobilise Scotland’s science and policy communities in co-developing knowledge for policy impact, including understanding data and evidence needs for innovation and measuring progress.

Recent and emerging progress was welcomed, including with the National Performance Framework (NPF), the Blue Economy Action Plan (BEAP) and growing emphasis on cross-cutting policy including the Just Transition and the Circular Economy. We highlight here where further action can help develop and implement coherent policy, including enhancing the science-policy interface.

1. To **move beyond ‘business as usual’** in the Blue Economy, explicit recognition of the trade-offs and acknowledgement of the limits to growth of marine sectors (or specific practices) is needed. Although politically challenging, this is necessary to show leadership, build trust with stakeholders and set economic targets against social and ecological objectives. This requires understanding interactions across policy themes, including bringing the ‘marine’ into cross-government approaches, including the Just Transition.
2. A ‘whole of government’ approach will promote coherence. **Cross-ministerial engagement and coordination**, akin to the Just Transition Commission³, are welcomed. However, where possible, there is preference for **streamlining approaches** over creating new mechanisms, **easing barriers and leveraging opportunities** for coherence and collaboration across the development and implementation of policy and legislation. **Greater cross-governmental co-ordination** could be enabled by a strong relationship between BEAP outcomes and Scotland’s NPF, also relating national performance to the SDGs.
3. Alongside policy, **economic drivers** support a sustainable transition. New markets can help achieve social and ecological goals while creating economic opportunities. ‘Valuing’ the ocean must account for natural capital benefiting society, including qualitative targets for wellbeing and social outcomes; accommodating **marine natural capital assessment into the NPF** is an outstanding challenge for science as well as policy.
4. Policy Coherence needs to be informed by and implemented through planning and management mechanisms. **Regional marine planning (RMP) should play an important role**, as a space for setting long-

¹ UN Framework Convention on Climate Change

² Convention on Biological Diversity

³ <https://www.gov.scot/groups/just-transition-commission/>

term visions, navigating trade-offs and building synergies at a tangible scale. RMP is not yet meeting its potential as an enabler of positive change; renewed focus on both regional and national marine planning is needed. Specifically addressing policy coherence in the next iteration of **Scotland's National Marine Plan** would drive progress and support implementation of the BEAP.

5. Local governance is central to delivering the BEAP, with opportunities for bottom-up, place-based approaches to decision-making, particularly in Scotland's islands. However, we need to evaluate whether recent devolution of decision-making to local levels is working: is this leading to more **democratised marine governance**, and can it be improved?
6. **Adaptive approaches** are essential, and learning can be accelerated at local scale. Scotland's islands are opportune for innovation in governance, due to higher adaptive capacity and local engagement.
7. Across the Blue Economy, **science plays a fundamental role** for a more sustainable pathway. Evidence informs policy by understanding baselines, trends, thresholds and tipping points, as well as the multiple and interacting effects of human activities and the effectiveness of management interventions. **Measuring progress requires robust data and evidence** from a monitoring framework with well-defined objectives and indicators, informed by the diverse disciplines required to inform progress on policy objectives such as the Just Transition. While there remain many hurdles for the natural sciences, there is **growing emphasis on the need for significant advances in the social sciences** and its application to sustainability challenges.
8. The differences between the scientific and policy worlds are stark and affect interaction, including the time pressures of governmental decision-making, and the lack of support and reward in academia for policy engagement. We seek an **evolution in our professional 'cultures'**, moving from a linear view to more collaborative approaches across science and the development and implementation of policy.
9. Skills in working across the **science-policy boundary** are valuable but require training and professional recognition. Boundary organisations and knowledge brokers play an important role with capacity to understand and communicate between a range of disciplines and policy areas.
10. Specific recommendations for **improving science / policy integration** for the Blue Economy:
 - Train scientists in policy processes, including students and early career researchers.
 - Support policy experts in understanding the scientific process and emerging research.
 - Secondment opportunities for scientists to play active roles in policy development and implementation.
 - Enhance the role of research-pooling initiatives to support policy, including Marine Alliance for Science and Technology in Scotland (MASTS)⁴ and SAGES⁵.
 - Recognise the role of scientists within government in facilitating knowledge transfer from non-government scientists.

More information available

All project outputs are available at [The Role of the Ocean: Driving the transition to a resilient and inclusive future](#), including two workshop reports and an explainer video of 'policy coherence'.

⁴ <https://www.masts.ac.uk/>

⁵ <https://www.sages.ac.uk/>