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Dear David,

Thank you for your letter of 28 April to the Secretary of State about ocean recovery. I am replying as the Minister responsible for this policy area.

To protect our ocean, the UK Government must be ambitious in the actions taken to tackle climate change, starting with working through the Paris Agreement to achieve net zero by 2050 and keep 1.5 degrees within reach. A healthy ocean can be a key ally in our fight against climate change. Protecting and restoring critical marine habitats can help protect coastal communities from rising seas and more frequent storms and can even help absorb carbon dioxide.

The UK Government is committed to ensuring that climate change adaptation, resilience, and mitigation are fully considered in our marine and fisheries policies.

The Government already has agreed ambitious targets for ocean recovery with the Devolved Administrations (DAs), through our statutory UK Marine Strategy (UKMS). The UKMS sets out a vision for UK waters to achieve clean, safe, healthy, biologically diverse, and productive seas, which are used sustainably. It also provides a legal framework, agreed with the DA, for assessing and monitoring the status of our seas and to put in place the measures needed to achieve Good Environmental Status (GES).

In October 2019, the Government published an updated UKMS Part One which provided an assessment of UK marine waters, objectives for GES, and targets and indicators to measure progress towards GES. Meanwhile, the updated UKMS Part Two, published in March 2021, sets out the monitoring programmes we will use to assess those targets and indicators in the period up to 2024. We are currently in the process of developing an updated UKMS Part Three, which will set out an updated programmes of measures for achieving or maintaining GES and aim to publish that later this year.

Since the final set of marine plans were published in June 2021, The Government has established a programme of work on marine spatial prioritisation, which will consider a future vision for our seas. To ensure this vision is holistic we will consider the needs of all sea users and draw on a wide range of evidence including social, economic, and environmental. For example, we have a project underway in the East Marine plan area to explore the potential for using a marine natural capital and ecosystem approach to marine planning. We hope that this and other outputs from the spatial prioritisation programme will inform the second generation of marine plans and a potential refresh of the marine policy statement.

Defra has provided £3 million annually to fund the additional duties given to the Inshore Fisheries and Conservation Authorities (IFCAs) when they were established in 2011. This funding has been protected since 2011 despite budgetary pressures within Defra. As outlined in the Marine and Coastal Access Act 2009, IFCAs have a responsibility to balance the social and economic benefits of exploiting sea fisheries resources of their districts with the need to protect the marine environment from, or promote its recovery from, the effects of exploitation. This includes the management of Marine Protected Areas (MPAs) within IFCA districts.

The IFCAs use a range of management measures ranging from voluntary measures to making byelaws for confirmation by the Secretary of State, drawing on local knowledge and expertise of members. IFCAs must implement a fair, effective, and proportionate enforcement regime. Local authorities provide the majority of the funding to IFCAs to reflect the local delivery and accountability of the IFCAs.

Following the Benyon Review into Highly Protected Marine Areas (HPMAs), the Government has committed to introducing pilot HPMAs in English waters. HPMAs will provide the highest protection in our seas and will allow full recovery to as most natural a state as possible, as they prohibit all destructive, extractive, and depositional activities within the entire site, thus enabling the ecosystem to thrive. The Government has developed a shortlist of potential sites for designation as HPMAs based on ecological, social, and economic criteria.

There are 178 MPAs protecting 40% of English waters, all sites are protected through the planning and licensing regimes that cover activities such as dredging for aggregates and constructing offshore wind farms. In English inshore waters, 98 MPAs already have byelaws in place to protect sensitive features from damaging fishing activities. The first four offshore byelaws have now also been announced and plans are in place to protect all offshore sites by the end of 2024, using new powers in the Fisheries Act 2020.

Thank you once again for taking the time to contact us about this important issue. Please let me know if I can be of any further assistance with this or any other matters in the future.



**REBECCA POW MP**