Centre for Good Relations

Scotland's Marine Futures Process Overview

Getting beneath the surface and building collaboration

The Process

Scotland's Marine Futures (previously known as Making Waves) is a process of civic mediation. It has been established with the core aim of enhancing mutual understanding between different marine interests. By creating spaces for facilitated dialogue for participants to collectively work through issues of contention and dispute, the process aims to build trust and good relationships that are sustained over the long-term, building better collaboration and outcomes, particularly in the context of an ever-evolving and demanding policy landscape for Scotland's marine environment.

The process works at the local (to date, primarily island) level and national level, and between the two, as concern around the disconnect between national level policymaking and local realties is a central issue highlighted by the early stages of the process. Ultimately, Scotland's Marine Futures (SMF) envisions a future where Scotland's marine sectors work together through strong, mutually respectful relationships to facilitate productive, cross-sector dialogue and effective decision-making on Scotland's marine management challenges and opportunities. SMF's vision is to catalyse a collaborative approach to healthy and sustainable seas in Scotland through a civic mediation process grounded in respect.

This document provides a broad overview of the Marine Futures process to date, looking at the background, those involved, and the various stages.

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Background

Following a similar process in sustainable upland deer management, and cross-sector interest in the application of civic mediation methodology to the marine space, in August 2024, Centre for Good Relations (CfGR) received funding from Marine Fund Scotland to undertake a pilot project to understand the need for, ideas about, and willingness of stakeholders to be involved in a potential multi-year project of relationship building and productive conversations between marine users in Scotland.

Interest in this approach has been prompted by a breakdown in trust and relationships, perceived and felt by many marine stakeholders and coastal communities, following contentious policy developments in recent years – particularly surrounding the Highly Protected Marine Areas (HPMAs) proposal – and a broad recognition that more can be done to build better collaborative working.

Note: for more information on CfGR's work around deer management please visit:

- https://centreforgoodrelations.com/cfgr-common-ground-forum/
- https://thecommongroundforum.scot/

Who's Involved

From the outset, there was keen interest in ensuring the cross-sector ownership of the process and to engage the relevant stakeholders at the national level. To this end, a National Reference Group (NRG) was established to support the process, with members from:

- Crown Estate Scotland
- Coastal Communities Network
- Marine Directorate/ Scottish Government
- NatureScot
- RSPB
- Salmon Scotland
- Scottish Environment LINK
- Scottish Fishermen's Federation
- Young Sea Changers Scotland

With regularly scheduled meetings, and additional catch-ups when necessary, the NRG functions as a vital sounding board for the process, hearing feedback from CfGR's work in the field, and collectively guiding the process. The NRG is open to new membership and has expanded since its initial formation.

It is also worth noting that while the process has been in its early stages, RSPB has provided support for practical matters of the work by hosting the funding and chairing NRG meetings,

with Scottish Environment LINK more recently taking over these duties. The long-term aim here is to move towards a greater cross-sector organisation in the running of the process.

As part of the pilot process, a Local Steering Group (LSG) was also established in Shetland, which is similarly made up of a cross section of different marine interests. Not wanting to ask too much of participants' time, this group functions in a more light touch way, meeting every so often, as and when required, to inform and steer the local process.

The Role of CfGR

Centre for Good Relations is an independent not-for-profit company whose core work is civic mediation. They carry out the work in the field and run the process, which primarily entails meeting with and hearing from stakeholders in the marine space about issues affecting their communities and sectors, and exploring avenues for facilitated dialogue around those issues. Experienced in varied contexts of societal conflict, CfGR's primary role is to create and facilitate the right spaces where good conversations can happen; where issues and tensions are unpacked, and where trust and good relationships are fostered.

While it is often asked what preset 'outputs' or 'outcomes' a process might deliver, it is important to note that in civic mediation the focus is on people and relationships. CfGR do not enter a process with preconceived outcomes but with the aim of creating the space(s) where participants can have productive conversations and work collectively towards their own outcomes. The process seeks to complement much that is good that is already knowingly or unknowingly in place in any particular context, developing organically and in an iterative way alongside existing process and structures, and being shaped by what support is felt appropriate.

There is a recognition that CfGR practitioners, as the impartial outsiders, are not experts on any particular issue that they may be asked to facilitate, nor can they hope to be across all of the nuances of any given situation or issue, but by providing the right support, the process strives to bring the people who possess the knowledge and expertise together into spaces to work through things constructively.

In the long-term, the civic mediation approach aims to help build and maintain more resilient relationships so that when future issues of contention almost inevitably arise these can continue to be worked on constructively without there reaching an impasse, and without relationships breaking down.

The Pilot Phase

During the initial pilot, exploratory scoping exercises were undertaken by CfGR in Shetland, Orkney and the Outer Hebrides to understand the issues being experienced in each place, to assess the level of interest in a mediative approach to address those issues, and, crucially, to determine whether the timing was right to explore things. With the assistance of the National Reference Group, and follow-up conversations (including feedback sessions) with stakeholders in the various areas, it was determined that a lengthier assessment would be undertaken in Shetland. This was to understand the context more fully and to further assess if there was an appetite and willingness to engage in a process of dialogue to discuss the issues, perspectives, and concerns that people shared. Crucially too, these conversations helped inform what the space for discussions would look like.

During the assessment process, Shetlanders outlined their perspectives on the increasing pressure and significant changes facing Shetland's marine space; how these changes affect people in different ways and across different levels, and from these conversations many felt that it would be useful to be able to discuss this collectively in some way. With the additional support of a Local Steering Group, this led to the organising of a Civic Workshop held in Lerwick on Thursday 6th March 2025.

The Shetland Civic Workshops

1st Civic Workshop – Thursday, 6th March 2025

The aim of the 1st workshop was to provide the opportunity for local participants to explore in conversation with others from across different perspectives how they felt about changes facing Shetland's marine space, how these changes impacted them, and what they felt this could mean for Shetland's culture, environment, and economy. Participants included people from fishing, aquaculture, the local scientific community, environmental interests, local authority, and wider civic society.

Working Agreement: In order to set the right tone and spirit for conversation and behaviour during the workshops, a Working Agreement was established at the outset of both and agreed by all participants.

The 1st workshop programme was varied and flexible, and included opportunities to explore, among various other issues:

- How various interest groups feel they are perceived by others.
- The many pressures facing fishermen, particularly inshore, and the threat to their livelihoods and communities.
- The pressure felt by the wider community facing extensive development.

- How development can be balanced with other interests that make use of the marine space.
- Concern around environmental factors, climate change and the impact on biodiversity.

The workshop provided participants with opportunities to engage and connect informally with each other in between formal sessions. The overall feeling of the process was positive; with participants showing a general curiosity, open-mindedness, and willingness to participate, whilst recognising there may be a degree of scepticism and concern on the part of some people more widely which will need attention as the process develops further.

Here are some of the comments shared on the day for why people participated:

- Exploring the concern for how Shetland's communities are affected by these changes,
- Being interested in how Shetlanders can work better together,
- Considering how we can marry the protection of livelihoods and the environment,
- Explore how Shetland might gain greater control and benefit from upcoming developments,
- Wanting to address the concern about national policy and how it affects things locally.

Feedback from some of the participants on their experience of the workshop included:

- It was a safe environment to discuss the issues.
- It was good to get everyone in the same room as this group has not met together before.
- It was good to spend the time together to really listen to what people had to say.
- Good to have done this, wish we had done it 20 years ago!

2nd Civic Workshop – Wednesday, 23rd April 2025

During the 1st workshop, a common view expressed was that people feel 'out of sight and out of mind' when policy decisions are being made on the marine environment that can have a significant impact on local people's livelihoods, and island life. As such, the 2nd Civic Workshop aimed to provide the opportunity for local people, and national policy makers and influencers to come together to:

- Directly hear and consider each other's perspectives, build understanding, and explore how Shetland's seas are impacted by national policy.
- Collectively consider how people can work together to maximise the potential of, and minimise the impact to, Shetland's culture, environment and economy.

In a similar vein to the 1st gathering, the 2nd workshop programme was varied and flexible, and provided participants with opportunities to engage and connect informally with each other in between formal sessions. The overall feeling of the process remained positive; with participants showing a curiosity, open-mindedness, and willingness to participate and appropriately challenge each other through the day. There was also a recognition and appreciation of the continuing concern on the part of some people, though they value the process, of the personal financial challenges they face in their ongoing participation and the impact this has on their livelihoods.

Thoughts and reflections shared by participants on their experience of the 2nd workshop included:

- It was a useful day, a move in the right direction.
- Today has demonstrated that talking face-to-face is invaluable. A sense that there could be a solution found by people in the room, and we want to continue these conversations.
- We dug deep today, even got to the root of solutions, especially talking about the scale of development – bigger is not always better.
- Engaging in this process is a step closer to resolving the issues that have been explored. There is a need to try something different, and engagement with this process is hopefully one step closer to achieving something that has taken decades to get to.
- It was useful to hear different people's views on similar subjects. I hope that officials from government and non-government organisations can put these hopes into practice to bring something positive into action. It is important to remember when people go back to their day jobs.
- Was not sure what to expect, but this was a very useful opportunity to talk broadly, widely and openly about difficult things. Also great to hear different perspectives, unlike in day-to-day life. The trick is what is next and what comes out of this.
- The day reinforced feeling of the need to take the time to trust this process. It is key to think about what comes next and reflect on today.

Some agreed next steps were finalised at the end of the workshop:

- Centre for Good Relations would have follow-up discussions with participants, the National Reference Group and Local Steering Group to determine if, and in what form, the process may continue. It would be explored whether building further upon the Civic Workshops in Shetland might be considered helpful or if the process might be valued in other locations.
- Informal commitments were made between different stakeholders for ongoing conversations on specific issues that currently impact relationships and trust between them. A commitment was made from Scottish government officials to further consider what was discussed on the day. CfGR would check back on these commitments and ensure some form of feedback is provided at appropriate points to those who have engaged in the process to keep them informed.

Note: Lengthy and detailed notes were taken to capture the extensive discussions at these workshops. While these remain confidential and exclusively for the reference of the participants themselves, a summary of the discussions, intended for wider sharing (as agreed upon by the participants), is available. If you would like to read this, you can now find the document on CfGR's website.

When it comes to trust and relationship building, CfGR recognises that much often goes unseen and unspoken. Sometimes, for issues of confidentiality, particularly regarding technical and practical matters, it must remain this way. Indeed, progress in this regard can be difficult to quantify and describe, though it is felt that the structure of these workshops supported moments to foster greater mutual understanding, spurring a general improvement in working relationships. Positive steps were taken towards better collaborative working across several different marine interests, with commitments made to continue in this spirit. This was acknowledged by participants, though it was also noted that much more work remained to be done.

Interim Period

Unfortunately, what followed the Shetland workshops was a lull in the process from May to October 2025 while matters of funding were resolved. Nevertheless, during this period, CfGR committed to maintaining the process in a low-level form. The principal aim was to maintain relationships with those who had engaged in the 1st phase, updating stakeholders and discussing their feedback, with conversations kept ongoing particularly with the Local Steering Group in Shetland, including check-ins with individuals. While some recognised that momentum had naturally been lost during this period, it was also felt that a good foundation had been laid to carry things forward positively.

The 2nd Phase

Following the well-received pilot in Shetland, and with funding support from the Marine Directorate to sustain the good progress that had been achieved, Scotland's Marine Futures resumed fully in November 2025. Building on the Workshops, the process has continued in Shetland and at the national level, with conversations around specific issues; particularly, a widespread feeling of consultation fatigue, and the ineffectiveness of existing consultation methods more broadly.

Thought was initially given to how the process might run alongside the planned consultation on Inshore MPAs, and this was explored with local and national stakeholders, though with the announcement that this would be delayed, the focus shifted. Nevertheless, CfGR continued conversations at the national level, raising government awareness of the workings of the process, while discussing the issues that are being experienced by the Marine Directorate and other marine-related departments, as well as that of other national organisations (industry bodies, eNGOs etc.). From this, CfGR gained a better sense of the evolving picture at that level, especially the state of relationships, and how the process might develop there.

While Shetland had been a focus for activity during the pilot phase, CfGR and the NRG recognised that many stakeholders in both Orkney and the Outer Hebrides had expressed a similar appetite for the mediative approach, though, owing to several factors, the timing was not felt to be quite right for their contexts. With this in mind, it was felt important to revisit both locations, and for CfGR to touch base again with local stakeholders. Some of

this took place remotely (particularly, in the case of Lewis and Harris), though visits were also made to Orkney, and Uist and Barra, to get a sense of the local picture and what might have changed. Owing to the timeframe of the pilot and ferry disruption, CfGR had yet to visit Uist and Barra in the pilot phase, so an initial scoping visit there became the focus of activity in the Outer Hebrides.

We heard about many issues that were particular to each context, but also some overarching challenges felt by all three island areas, not least a sense of not being respected and genuinely taken into account when it comes to government decision-making. Much like the people of Shetland, many in Orkney and the Outer Hebrides have expressed that they feel 'out of sight and out of mind', with the ineffective and 'tick-box' nature of current consultation methods again a central point of contention.

Capacity Building: Conflict and Mediative Awareness Courses

A core focus of the process in this phase has become capacity building, and the provision of Conflict and Mediative Awareness training courses for those in the marine context. The aim here is to build resilience in relationships and ensure the continuity and sustainability of mediative approaches beyond CfGR's direct involvement. In April 2026, a 2-day course

was held in Lerwick for a cross-sector group, and a 1-day course was held for Scottish Government in Edinburgh. These training courses have been well received, and there has been interest expressed in further opportunities, including for the provision of courses for other local areas, and for a wider group of national stakeholders.

Some feedback from participants at these courses included:

- "It's been good to see the interactions between different marine interests. It's been a valuable experience and opportunity to learn from, and about, one another."
- 'The course is good for realising everybody deals with conflict differently, and that's okay.'
- "It's been good to meet people in this setting, to understand people on a personal level, and understand better where people are coming from. It brings out empathy."

These short courses encourage participants to constructively think about conflict, how it develops, and how they themselves approach and engage with it, exploring different conflict 'styles'. Aspects of civic mediation methodology are also introduced to participants, including some practical everyday tools for understanding and managing conflicted situations.

In the 2nd phase, SMF also provided the opportunity for some who had been involved in the process to date to attend a lengthier 5-day course on Civic Mediation methodology. This included the chair of the NRG, a local stakeholder, and a local practitioner who CfGR had met during the pilot phase

As aligns with the core ethos of CfGR, the SMF process endeavours to impart and draw out the skills for participants to become everyday practitioners of civic mediation in their contexts, enhancing how they navigate conflict around them to achieve positive outcomes. The courses are designed to be open to those from all walks of life – not just the leaders of organisations, but community members and, essentially, everyone and their Granny! Where possible, it is also hoped that the process can employ and train some individuals in various local contexts who are well placed – being in a more impartial position and having knowledge of different perspectives – to become civic mediators. In Shetland, where the process is more well-established, a trained local practitioner supports the process, helping to maintain engagement, facilitate conversations and deliver training.

Looking Ahead: Aims for a 3rd Phase and Beyond

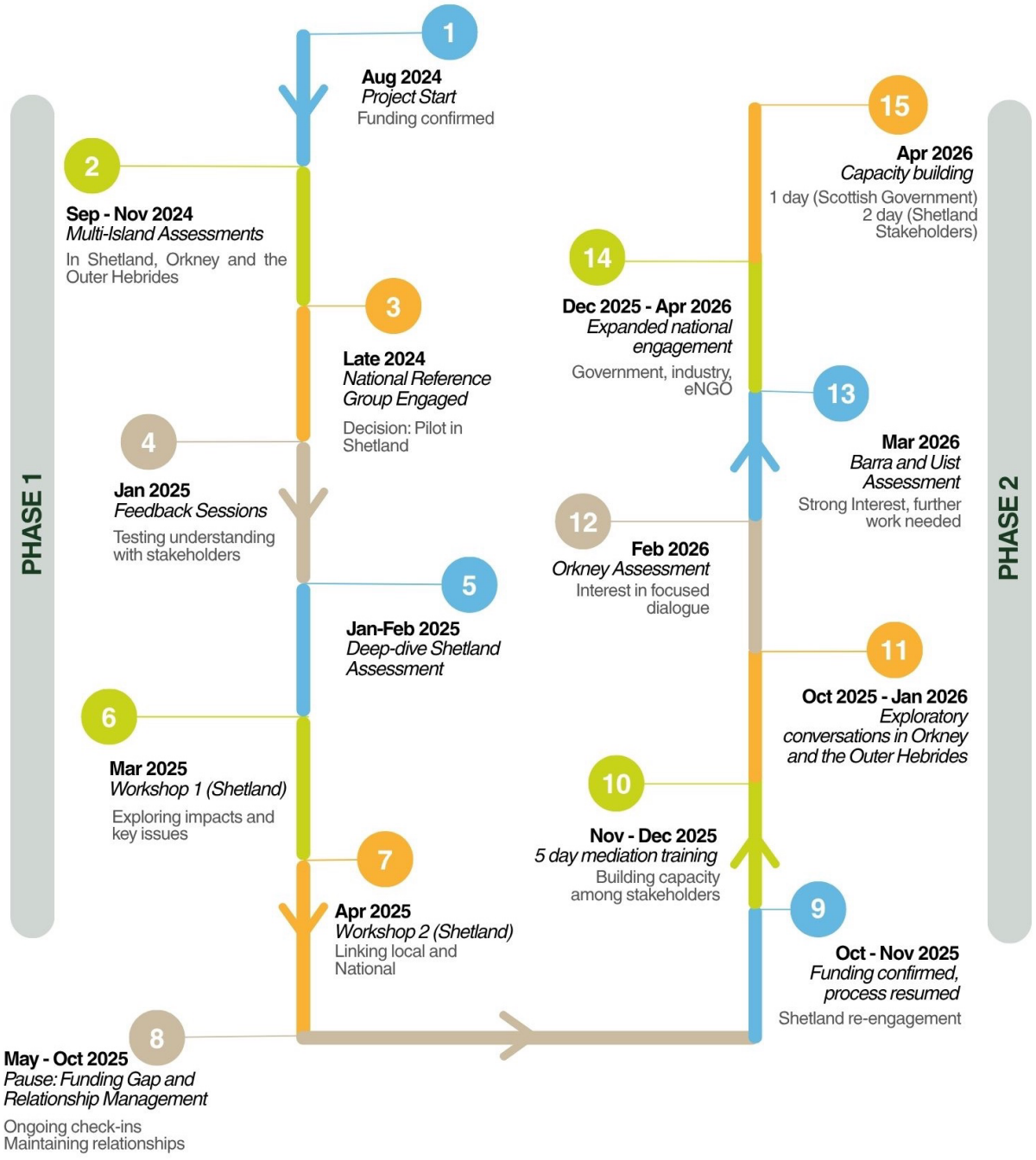
In recognition of the value of the civic mediation approach for the marine space demonstrated by the Marine Futures process in its early stages, and conscious of the iterative nature of relationship building, the NRG is firm in its desire to enable its continuation. Funding has been sought from cross-sector sources for a 3rd phase, and to secure its future over the longer-term in order to deliver the project's vision. Multi-year funding will help avoid another lull in the process, as followed the initial pilot period, which the NRG and local stakeholders are keen to avoid.

A core aim for the next phase is the strengthening and deepening the current process where it is already established, widening the network of local voices and broadening engagement in the process. The continuation of the SMF process will also see the place-based engagement approach deepened in other areas where initial scoping has been carried out, and local civic mediation processes developed where there is appetite and expressed need to explore things further. While, at this stage, the focus is on the three island areas where some exploration of issues has already taken place, CfGR will keep abreast of other pressing issues of contention in Scotland's marine space, ensuring that the process is responsive to the needs of different marine interests and coastal communities.

Bridging the local-national disconnect remains a key focus, with the process exploring opportunities to continue to bring national policymakers and influencers into local conversations, and creating spaces where greater mutual understanding and trust can be achieved. The process also looks to strengthen national relationships and to improve national-level discussions, while provision of further Conflict and Mediative Awareness courses is a core aim across all levels of engagement.

Looking ahead, it is also hoped that supported communities can more effectively influence policy-making, with SMF providing avenues for informal discussions that complement and work alongside formal consultation processes, ensuring that policy and decision-making in the marine context is felt to be more effective.

Scotland's Marine Futures Timeline (1st and 2nd phases of process)



If you have any questions about Scotland's Marine Futures and CfGR's role, please do not hesitate to get in touch with CfGR Practitioner Liam at: liam@centreforgoodrelations.com