Dear Sirs,

Government Response to the House of Commons Science and Technology Committee Report – “Investigating the Oceans”.

Comments on the Government response from the Marine Biological Association

1. The Marine Biological Association (MBA) is a Learned Society established in 1884. The MBA has about 1200 members worldwide and runs The Laboratory in Plymouth where 60 staff work. The MBA has an international reputation for excellence and innovation in research and receives strategic funding through the Natural Environment Research Council’s Oceans' 2025 Programme. The MBA is also actively engaged in providing scientific information to underpin policy and inform environmental management. The MBA hosts the Marine Environmental Change Network (MECN) which is concerned with the coordination of UK long-term research and monitoring and the provision of advice to policy-makers. The MBA also initiated the Marine Life Information Network (MarLIN) which undertakes research to support marine environmental management protection and education.

2. The MBA has previously provided evidence to the Select Committee on Science and Technology’s enquiry “Investigating the Oceans” and welcomes this opportunity to comment on the Government response to the “Investigating the Oceans” Report.

3. Generally, the MBA welcomes the positive responses to a number of recommendations but is disappointed at the non-committal nature of some responses. The MBA feels that the response in places falls short of providing reassurance to the marine science community that it appreciates the extreme importance and urgency of improving mechanisms for understanding the roles of the oceans, improving sustainability and facilitating action to prevent the likely negative consequences of climate change in a range of areas.

Specific comments to government response.

Recommendation for a Marine Agency (p1).
4. Although the Select Committee’s suggestion of a new Marine Agency needed further development (for example, it is not clear how would it relate to a new Marine Management Organisation as proposed as part of the Marine Bill), the basic principle of replacing the current arrangement with a new body that would solve some of the problems identified with IACMST (e.g. wider stakeholder engagement, improved coordination of marine related activities) was a sound one. However, it is not clear how the new Marine Science Co-ordination Committee (MSCC) suggested in the Government response differs significantly from current arrangements. We are concerned, therefore, that the government’s proposal amounts to slight modifications to the status quo, rather than a complete overhaul of current arrangements.

5. Point 6. The MBA is concerned that NERC is not able to guarantee funding for long term research, beyond the three-year period of a Comprehensive Spending Review and that funding of the final three years of the Oceans 2025 programme could not be confirmed in this response. Notwithstanding the Comprehensive Spending Review, the MBA feels that it is critical to have exceptional mechanisms in place to guarantee funding of long-term projects. Such projects are essential for assessing environmental change and cannot be properly funded through piecemeal mechanisms. Past interruptions to funding of long-term monitoring programmes have resulted in significant gaps in datasets and have devalued some of the most critical evidence for climate-induced perturbations of ecosystems.

6. Point 19. A regional barter agreement for UK coastal vessels is likely to be of limited value given the small pool size of such vessels and their already fully-committed schedules.

7. Point 43. Point 43. We are pleased first of all that the government is keen to complete a network of Marine Protected Areas (MPAs) as soon as possible and would agree that we cannot delay this for further evidence gathering. An important point that seems to have been missed in both the recommendation and response is that “MPA” is a generic term covering everything from voluntary to statutory highly protected. So, we are not sure if “MPA” refers to highly protected areas or what. Furthermore, the Government response acknowledges that existing MPA’s were designated in order to meet our European obligations but does not mention that the marine habitats listed in the Habitats Directive are very broad and not comprehensive. There are gaps to fill. We would disagree that we have “a fairly good scientific understanding in relation to the current network of sites”. Although site specific monitoring is undertaken and we may have some understanding of natural change at the site level, it is at the larger scale of a Marine Protected Area Network itself that research is needed. For example, studies are needed into issues of connectivity such as larval dispersal and species movement between sites; there is also need for a greater understanding of how
a network of MPAs could provide resilience in the face of changes induced by warming in climate, such as the alteration in species range distributions. We would, therefore, suggest that the idea to establish a number of MPAs, but with a high degree of protection and to be used for research, as soon as possible in order to enable evidence to be gathered is a good one and should not be rejected by the government. Whilst many potential sites for highly protected Marine Nature Reserves (MNRs) are obvious, we agree that carrying out more survey work and data collection would assist in site selection and urge government to undertake meaningful surveys to which criteria for Nationally Important Marine Sites and Features (sensu the Review of Marine Nature Conservation) can be applied.

8. Point 51. The MBA is pleased to see the inclusion of Learned Societies in working groups concerned with encouraging greater public knowledge of ocean-related issues.

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