

Solent Forum Horizon Scanning 2024

1. Introduction

This Horizon Scanning for 2024 provides a light touch review of what has been happening since the beginning of the year and what is in the pipeline.

2. Government intentions

In July 2024, the King's Speech included 35 bills and draft bills, setting out the government's plans for this parliament and recognising "the urgency of the global climate challenge and the new job opportunities that can come from leading the development of the technologies of the future".

The government will establish Great British Energy, a new publicly owned company that will invest £8.3 billion in clean energy, including offshore wind.

There is to be a new Water (Special Measures) Bill to 'strengthen the powers of the water regulators', enabling them to bring automatic and 'severe fines'. With every wastewater company in England and Wales currently under investigation for sewage spills, this new bill could be significant.

There was limited mention of nature and biodiversity loss, with a promise to "use development to fund nature recovery", mainly through the biodiversity net gain mechanism by which developers must restore and improve the natural environment and species habitats in return for being allowed to build.

The Deputy Prime Minister and Defra Secretary of State have written to environmental NGOs on the planning and infrastructure bill. The letter illustrates the new government's desire to use 'the value gained from enabling development to proceed quickly and smoothly to support nature recovery.'

The [Government's 25 Year Environment Plan](#) continues to shape national coastal and marine policy, revisions have been made as part of the [Environmental Improvement Plan 2023](#). The new government formed in July 2024 made a commitment to rapidly review the Environmental Improvement Plan before the end of the year to make sure it is fit for purpose to deliver ambitious targets to save nature.

It states it will introduce a new, statutory plan to protect and restore our natural environment, with delivery plans to meet each of its ambitious targets. This includes those on water, circular economy and air quality as well as delivering against the target to halt the decline in species abundance by 2030.

The new Environment Secretary set out the top 5 priorities for Defra in parliament. These are:

1. Rivers and seas clean up
2. Zero waste economy
3. Support farmers for food security
4. Nature recovery
5. Protecting communities from flooding

[Natural England have launched their 2024/25 Action Plan](#) which sets out how they will deliver for people and planet through building partnerships for nature's recovery. Their priorities for marine and coast include enabling infrastructures and green energy on land and sea, improving environmental standards, ensuring clean and plentiful water, and delivering ambitious environmental action with farmers through the Landscape Recovery Scheme.

Natural England is at the forefront of work to reach the binding goals of halting species decline by 2030 and protecting 30 per cent of our land and sea for nature.

3. Habitats and species

The 25 year Environment Plan will continue to shape national, coastal and marine policy. The government has said a rapid review of the Environmental Improvement Plan will be made before the end of the year to make sure it is fit for purpose to deliver ambitious targets to save nature.

The Environment Agency has established a [ReMeMaRe](#) Programme Office to support area teams and local partners to significantly increase the scale and pace of practical estuarine and coastal habitat restoration around England over the next 5 years.

New wetlands and nature reserve areas will be created around the Solent after £9.6m of government funding was acquired. Proposals have been signed off by the Partnership for South Hampshire (PfSH), which brings together 12 local authorities in the region. The aim of the partnership is to focus on environmental, cultural and economic issues in the area. None of the sites benefitting from the funding have been announced yet. Local councils will confirm individual schemes once land purchases are completed.

The [Solent Seascape Project](#) (SSP) continues to be one of the most significant projects in the Solent. It aims to restore and protect at least 30% of the Solent's seascape. The SSP, in partnership with stakeholders, will produce a Solent Recovery Plan and data portal which will look at reducing passive pressures affecting the condition of the Solent Marine Sites (SEMS). The Solent Forum continues to chair the working group that guides this, it will be a key project that will map activity pressures in the Solent and agree management measures to address those pressures.

Local Nature Recovery Strategies

Local Nature Recovery Strategies (LNRS) were brought in under the Environment Act, 2021. Responsible Authorities (local authorities) are required to develop them and report on progress. The first LNRS' will be produced in 2024/5. They will include the intertidal and those terrestrial habitats in the 'coastal zone of influence' such as saline lagoons, coastal grazing marsh and wader roosting and feeding sites. The statutory guidance requires that LNRS follow administrative boundaries into the intertidal zone only as far as mean low water. In May 2024, Defra clarified that Responsible Authorities should not include marine at this time; work is underway at the Marine Management Organisation (MMO) to explore how marine nature recovery might develop in the future.

There remains a strong desire to plan for the recovery of nature in both the Solent's marine and coastal areas and for this to support any new requirement for Marine Net Gain. The Solent Forum has worked with partners to help scope the strategic direction of Solent marine and coastal nature recovery, with the marine environment included as a voluntary extension to the statutory [Local Nature Recovery Strategy \(LNRS\)](#) process. This included a well attended [workshop](#) held in January 2024 for Solent stakeholders.

Net Gain

The government intends to make [Marine Net Gain](#) (MNG) a mandatory requirement for all new in-scope development activities in English waters below the mean low water mark. This will be in addition to statutory protections, such as compensatory measures requirements under the Habitats Regulations and the Marine and Coastal Access Act. It is expected that Defra will now develop MNG policy in conjunction with stakeholders and will consult further prior to implementation.

On 12 February 2024, [Biodiversity Net Gain \(BNG\)](#) was mandated in England under the Town and Country Planning Act 1990, as amended by the Environment Act 2021. Developers need to submit a Biodiversity Gain Plan, which outlines how they will achieve net gain, either on-site or through off-site measures. Development in the intertidal is included in BNG.

4. Flood and Coastal Erosion Risk Management

The Environment Agency's (EA) [National Flood and Coastal Erosion Risk Management Strategy for England](#) (FCERM) sets out what needs to be done by risk management authorities involved in flood and coastal erosion risk management for the benefit of people and places. Shoreline Management Plans (SMP) are used for coastal adaptation and provide a sustainable management approach for each stretch of the coastline. The Solent sits within the [North Solent SMP](#) and the [IoW SMP](#), both of which were [updated in 2022](#). In 2022, the EA published a Roadmap to 2026 to deliver the Strategy's vision.

The [Hayling Island Coastal Management Strategy](#) is expected to be published within the next 12 months and is being led by Coastal Partners. There are plans underway to develop a Chichester Harbour Investment and Adaptation Plan. Reports updating progress on the Habitat Compensation and Restoration Programme are hosted at: <https://southerncoastalgroup-scopac.org.uk/hcrp/>.

Other projects of significance include:

- Hurst Spit to Lymington Strategy
- Christchurch Bay FCERM Strategy (neighbouring authority)
- SCOPAC Sediment Transport Study

The [Southsea Coastal Scheme](#), managed by Coastal Partners, is the UK's largest local authority-led coastal defence project.

The scheme is divided into several phases:

- Long Curtain Moat: Completed between September 2020 and February 2023.
- Clarence Pier: Scheduled for 2027-2028.
- Southsea Common: Planned for 2024-2026.
- Southsea Castle: Underway from 2022 to 2024.
- Pyramids to Speakers' Corner: Ongoing from 2023 to 2024.
- South Parade Pier & Canoe Lake: Expected in 2026-2027.

5. Water

Last year the government announced a [new legal duty on water companies](#) in England to upgrade wastewater treatment works by 2030 in 'nutrient neutrality' areas like the Solent to the highest achievable technological levels.

The Water Industry Regulation Transformation Programme (WIRTP) launched in 2023. It set out measures to transform how the Environment Agency regulates the water industry to uncover more non-compliance and drive better performance from water companies. Inspections will rise to 4,000 by the end of March 2025; 10,000 in 2025/26 and 11,500 in 2026/27.

Southern Water's [Hampshire Water Transfer and Water Recycling Project](#) aims to address water shortages in Hampshire by creating a sustainable water supply system. One component will see treated wastewater from Budds Farm Wastewater Treatment Works being further purified using advanced recycling techniques. This purified water will be pumped into the Havant Thicket Reservoir.

The [Beachbuoy system](#), developed by Southern Water, provides near real-time information about storm overflow releases along the Solent coastline. This interactive web app helps residents and visitors stay informed about water quality at local bathing waters. The system uses tidal modelling to assess the impact of storm releases.

[Event Duration Monitoring](#) (EDM) is a system used to track the frequency and duration of storm overflow events. These monitors are installed on storm overflows to measure when and for how long these overflows are active. The data collected will help water companies and regulators understand the impact of storm overflows on water bodies and improve their management. The Environment Agency mandated that all storm overflows be fitted with EDM devices by the end of 2023.

Like in many water bodies the presence of pharmaceuticals and “forever chemicals” (PFAS) in the Solent is a growing environmental concern. PFAS are synthetic chemicals used in various industries, their persistence in the environment means they accumulate in water bodies, wildlife, and even humans. Pharmaceuticals can enter waterways through improper disposal, excretion, and wastewater treatment plants. Common pharmaceuticals found in water include antibiotics, painkillers and hormones which can affect aquatic life even at low concentrations.

The new Environment Secretary has announced a series of initial steps including new powers to hold water company bosses to account through customer panels and a strengthening of OWAT to ensure the sector is funded properly.

The Water (Special Measures) Bill will “require water companies to install real-time monitors at every sewage outlet with data independently scrutinised by the water regulators”.

6. Business, ports, harbours and shipping

Associated British Ports (ABP) has started on the first phase of the ABP Solent Gateway development at the Port of Marchwood. The development will improve landside and marine facilities and increase the capacity of the port to support MOD operations.

Exxon Mobil is seeking approval for a [Solent CO2 Pipeline Project](#), which would see a pipe running from its Fawley oil refinery near Southampton to a CO² storage site under the English Channel.

The [Solent Cluster](#) has been established to help maritime businesses across the Solent decarbonise their operations. It seeks to enable organisations to bid for government investment support for projects and develop hydrogen power capability.

[PTEC](#) is a multi-megawatt tidal stream energy generation project. Based to the south of the Isle of Wight, the fully consented site for the initial 30MW will provide enough energy to power a third of homes on the island. Its ambition is to develop the huge amount of tidal potential south of the Island and in the English Channel.

The Freeports approach will need to be tracked carefully to see what changes may come about under the new government.

The Aquind interconnector is a proposed electricity cable project that will link the UK and France. This 238 km (148 mile) cable would run from Lovedean in Hampshire to Normandy, passing through Portsmouth. The project is designed to provide cheaper and greener electricity by allowing electricity to flow between the two countries. The High Court recently overturned the UK government’s decision to block the project, meaning it may still go ahead.

Red Funnel is set to introduce a zero-emission, electric, high-speed ferry on the Solent route between Southampton and West Cowes, by late 2025. This new ferry, named the Artemis EF-24 Passenger, will utilise hydrofoil technology to lift out of the water, providing a smoother and more efficient journey.

7. Planning

The new government have signalled significant changes to the planning rules with a push to create more housing and promote renewables; the promotion of renewable energy will be part of the role of a new national energy company.

Various local plans are being reviewed and nature recovery features strongly within many including Eastleigh and Chichester.

The Three Harbours Partnership is publishing a strategy for Langstone, Chichester and Pagham. This will help to shape the Langstone Harbour Environmental Management Plan which is due to be reviewed this year.

Policy changes to support increased offshore renewables may impact the Solent, though likely less so than in other areas of the country.

8. Recreation

The Solent continues to be heavily used for land and water based recreation due to its large resident population and many visitors, particularly in the summer months. Tourism is a vital component of the Isle of Wight's economy. The Solent hosts an international Boatshow, international sailing events and numerous other local events that bring greater number of visitors.

Managing recreational pressure is an area that will need ongoing continual management to avoid impacting on the Solent's designated sites and for public safety. There are lots of organisations and partnerships across the Solent already doing excellent work on this and we all need to support this and continue to develop it. The [Solent Marine Sites Management Scheme](#) is a partnership that seeks to address the impacts from non-licensable activities like recreation across the Solent's designated sites.

9. Climate change

The ['State of the UK Climate' report](#) shows that data from the tide gauge at Newlyn, one of the longest available records around the UK, continues to show that sea level is rising, with 2023 the highest year on record for annual mean sea level since records began. Portsmouth is particularly vulnerable to sea level rise due to its low-lying geography. Coastal squeeze is a long term and ever increasing issue in the Solent with many coastal defences coming to the end of their lifespan and the need for new defences and adaptive management.

[Research](#) indicates that the central south coast of England, including the Solent, is experiencing a trend of increased storminess. This includes higher wave heights and more frequent extreme weather events. Storm surges contribute to coastal erosion and can overwhelm existing flood defences, leading to significant flooding and damage to properties. Rising sea levels due to climate change are expected to exacerbate the effects of storm surges, making coastal areas more vulnerable.

Efforts are ongoing to monitor and mitigate these impacts through improved coastal defences and better forecasting systems.

Marine heatwaves around the UK have become a significant concern. In June 2023, the seas around the UK and Ireland experienced one of the most severe marine heatwaves on the planet, with sea temperatures up to 5°C higher than usual. The impacts can include the die-back of heat sensitive habitats and species, species migration, increased disease and the formation of more extreme weather events. The loss of marine biodiversity and changes in fish populations can lead to significant economic losses for coastal communities that rely on fishing and tourism.

10. Coastal and marine policies, strategies and projects

The [Solent Forum Members' survey, 2024](#) highlighted coastal and marine policies, strategies and projects in preparation, as shown in Table 1.

Table 1. Coastal and Marine Policies, Strategies and Projects in Preparation

Solent Seascape's Nature Recovery Plan and Data Portal
Hurst Spit to Lymington Strategy
Eastleigh Borough Council Local Plan
Langstone Harbour Environmental Management Plan
Chichester District Local Plan 2021-2039 (submitted to the planning inspectorate for examination)
The Hayling Island Coastal Management Strategy
Chichester Harbour Management Plan (2025-2030), funding application being written
Partnership with Cambridge University to measure the long term impact of our maritime careers training with young people
Clean Water - Sports Alliance
Christchurch Bay FCERM Strategy (neighbouring)
SCOPAC Sediment Transport Study
<u>Habitat Compensation and Restoration Programme</u>
Policy changes to support increased offshore renewables may impact the area, though likely less so than in other areas of the country.
Tracking the Freeports approach. Significant changes to planning rules are anticipated.
On-going work to decarbonise the marine sector and to protect wider areas of biodiversity will both be significant drivers of change.

11. Most important coastal and marine issues to Solent Forum members

The [Solent Forum Members' survey, 2024](#) sought feedback on the most important coastal and marine issues, as shown in Table 2.

Table 2. Most important coastal and marine issues to Solent Forum members

Issue	N° Responses
Environmental and biodiversity enhancements (Nature Based Solutions, conserve existing habitats, restore those lost, support for birds)	10
Clean water	7
Adaptation and resilience to climate change (Decarbonisation)	6
Sustainable management of resources e.g. fisheries	3
Partnership/collaboration	3
Economics of coastal communities	2
Flood & Coastal Erosion Risk Management	2
Recreational pressures	2
Management of end of life boats	1
Heritage	1
Developing wildlife tourist destinations	1
Promotion of maritime opportunities careers for young people	1
Freedom of navigation	1
Legislative/regulatory barriers to habitat restoration	1
Damaging effects of increased shipping	1

12. Partnership Working

Solent Forum members highly value partnership working, and the following opportunities have been identified within the business planning process for 2025 to 2030.

Table 3. Partnership Opportunities

Solent Seascape Project
Coastal partners
Three Harbours
Dorset Coast Forum and the Studland Bay Marine Partnership
More coordinated research across the whole Solent region
Hamble River Authority on planning issues
Hamble Estuary Partnership
Supporting Natural England with the Voluntary No Anchoring Zone in Osborne Bay
CHaPRoN
Island Rivers (Catchment Partnership)
Southern Coastal Group/SCOPAC
Research into seagrass decline in harbours
Promotion of careers in the maritime sector
Clean Water - Sports Alliance
Solent Protection Society
Environment Agency and Natural England's Habitat Compensation and Restoration Programme
Partnership for South Hampshire
Isle of Wight Estuaries Partnership
Coastal Partnerships Network
Coastal Biosphere Partnership