

Appendix 3. Community Engagement Report

Introduction

There is no formal requirement to seek pre-application advice or undertake pre-application consultation in relation to the development of fish farms of less than 2 hectares equipment surface area. However, the National Marine Plan encourages operators to carry out pre-application discussion and consultation, and engage with local communities and others who may be affected, to identify and, where possible, address any concerns in advance of submitting an application.

The Applicant carried out informal and formal pre-application consultation and scoping prior to the submission of the initial planning applications, in addition to seeking feedback from stakeholders and the wider community at two open days in 2019. It remains committed to ensuring that, wherever practical, the views of stakeholders are considered in progressing the development of its sites and facilities, and to answering any questions that may arise locally in respect of its existing operations.

The Applicant maintains an open-door policy in terms of enquiries from the public, and welcomes any constructive opportunity to discuss its operations.

Initial Consultations (2015-2019)

The Applicant undertook informal consultation with several public bodies during its initial site selection process. This included meetings involving Scottish Natural Heritage (now NatureScot) and the Highland Council during 2015, and meetings with the Crown Estate prior to seeking Lease Option Agreements during August 2016. Email contact was made with Northern Lighthouse Board (who provided lighting recommendations), and Defence Infrastructure Organisation (no response received) during November 2016. During this time proposals were discussed with the local community through the Staffin Community Trust.

Formal pre-application advice was sought from The Highland Council, Scottish Natural Heritage, Marine Scotland Science, Marine Scotland Licencing, Fish Health Inspectorate (including Freshwater Fisheries Lab), Scottish Environment Protection Agency, Northern Lighthouse Board, Skye District Salmon Fishery Board and Defence Infrastructure Organisation in January 2019. In addition, other representative organisations were informed of the pre-app process, invited to attend the Open Days held in Staffin (15/02/19) and Kilmuir (16/02/19) and to comment and/or provide information as appropriate. These organisations included, but are not limited to, Mallaig and Northwest Fishermen's Organisation, Royal Yachting Association (Scotland), RSPB Scotland.

The Applicant provided details of these meetings and open days, including a summary of the comments made, in Annex 4 to the previous applications. Feedback was largely positive, and a number of points were raised that led to further consideration of the proposals at that time, including a reduction in pen numbers from 14 to 12 ahead of the submission of the original planning applications.

Subsequent Discussions (2020-2024)

The Applicant has had ongoing dialogue with Staffin Community Council. It advised the Community Council in late Autumn 2023 that it remained the Company's intention to operate across four sites, and of its plans to submit new planning applications for the North Sites. An article by the Applicant in the Staffin Community Trust Autumn 2023 newsletter, which has a local circulation, reiterated this point.

The Applicant met with Highland Council officers, in part to discuss options, on several occasions since the previous Applications. In July 2023 it became clear that other sites under investigation by the Applicant had significant and potentially more restrictive constraints associated with them, and that the only realistic option for the Applicant to operate across four sites was to submit revised proposals for the sites previously applied for and rejected in 2019/2020.

The Applicant met with NatureScot in early November 2023 to advise them of its proposals.

It secured CAR Licences for both North Sites during 2020, and has discussed its current proposals with SEPA through the review of existing licences and acted on its advice in respect of securing amended licences for smaller sites with lower biomass.

The Applicant's South Sites became operational four years ago and since that time, it has been approached on numerous occasions by local people stating that they had previously been against the principle of fish farming but that, having seen the existing sites, they are more likely to support revised proposals. Day-to-day contact with permanent residents of the Coastal Communities within which the Applicant operates is overwhelmingly supportive. On several occasions the Applicant has had residents apologising for objecting to the previous applications, stating that they had signed petitions against them even though they were not entirely certain of the purpose of the petition or what they were signing.

Since November 2023 it has been the Applicant's intention to work up and submit planning applications with a view to them going live in early 2024. Ideally, EIA Report and Planning Applications would have been submitted at the same time but external factors have required the Applicant to submit the Planning Applications during December 2023, which has led to an extended submission period prior to the applications being validated.

Recognising that external pressures prevented extensive local pre-application dialogue, the Applicant continued to seek engagement opportunities during January and February 2024. It met again with Staffin Community Council to share and seek feedback on its intentions, and has also met and discussed the proposals with Kilmuir Community Council and representatives of Flodigarry Township. Following the Community Council meetings and premature validation of the current Balmacqueen application by Highland Council, the Applicant has also responded to direct contact with several other members of the community who have made enquiries as to the future plans. The feedback has been largely supportive.

The Applicant will continue to attend such meetings and respond to face to face meeting requests as the applications progress through planning consultation.

Recognising that there is Commercial Fishing Activity within the proposed site areas, as documented in Chapter 6, the Applicant met with representatives of Scottish White Fish Producers Association and Mallaig and North-West Fishermen's Association in Inverness in February 2024. We have not at the time of writing had a response to our information request.

Recognising that the key concern around the proposed sites remains the landscape impacts, and that it is only possible for the SLVIA to consider a small number of viewpoints, the Applicant has commissioned digital renditions of the sites and their surroundings. This will enable views of the proposed fish farms from individual properties to be reviewed by parties interested in commenting on the Planning Applications.

The Applicant has a local presence in Staffin, and maintains a facebook page and website with information on its organisation, farming operations, personnel, community fund and opportunities. It remains open to ongoing discussions about its proposals and the content of its application submissions, and it can be contacted via the information pages on its website.