



Scottish
**Marine
Environmental
Enhancement**
Fund

Scottish Marine Environmental Enhancement Fund Insights Report – Summary

March 2024

Summary

In December 2023, SMEEF commissioned Howell Marine Consulting (HMC) to conduct a review of the activity, functioning, and impact of SMEEF since its inception in 2021. The purpose of this investigation was to gain a clearer understanding of the influence SMEEF funding has had on projects and organisations, gain insights into the experience of project leads in meeting SMEEF requirements, identifying areas where SMEEF has been successful and where there are opportunities for improvement.

This summary report sets out HMC’s approach to investigating the impact of SMEEF, namely through reviewing SMEEF documents, stakeholder interviews, and an online survey, along with findings from these activities, and a recommended approach to advance the future management of SMEEF, building on the fund’s achievements so far.

1. Overview of SMEEF

In recognition of the financial gap for environmental enhancement SMEEF was established in 2021 as an innovative financial mechanism encouraging private contributions to support marine environmental enhancement work across Scotland’s coasts and seas.

The SMEEF programme has been effective at securing and distributing public and private funds, supporting a range of organisation and community-led projects, such as seagrass and native oyster bed restoration. At time of writing SMEEF has funded approximately 54 marine and coastal restoration and enhancement projects across Scotland since 2021. The second SMEEF **Impact Report** published in July 2024 provides a detailed summary of these activities.

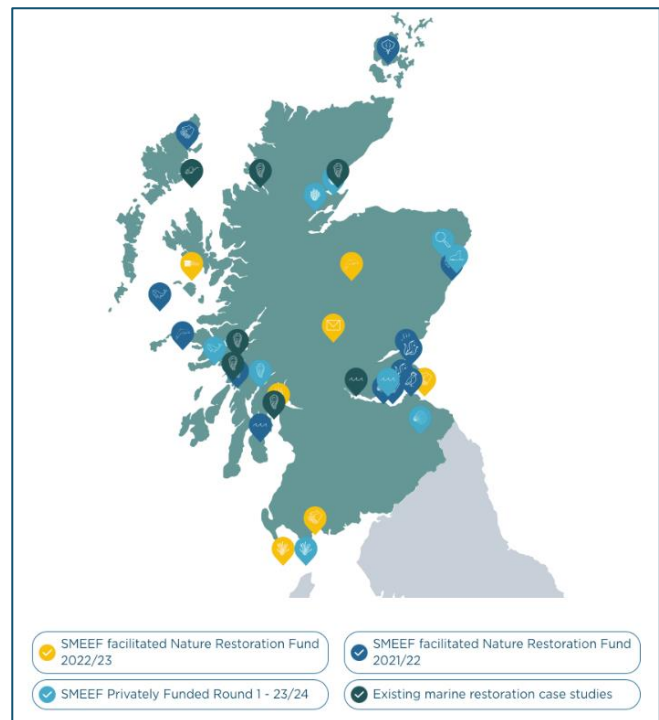


Figure 1: Map of Scotland showing the location of SMEEF / Nature Restoration Fund projects and existing marine restoration case studies

2. Approach to the review of SMEEF

The review of SMEEF was based on five components:

- I. Interviews
- II. Online surveys
- III. Project Case Studies (see our **Impact Report**)

3. Interview Findings

The following section provides an overview of the key themes that emerged from the interviews with project leads that have previously received funding from SMEEF.

I. Importance of SMEEF funding

In most interviews, it was highlighted that the project would not have gone ahead if SMEEF funding was not available, signifying the important role SMEEF has played. Some SMEEF-funded projects focused on developing and trialling new equipment, which enabled the collection of novel data sets.

II. Experience working with SMEEF

It was considered that the SMEEF team took a very practical approach to project delivery. Good communication with the SMEEF team was highlighted as a real benefit.

III. Timescales and funding

It was noted by most interviewees that the one-year funding cycle that SMEEF had to enforce in the early rounds* was challenging, particularly with regard to delivering long-term enhancement of the environment.

It was, however, noted that short funding rounds with small pots of money can be more beneficial to smaller organisations than larger ones.

**The one-year funding cycle reflects funding restrictions SMEEF was working to while distributing public funds. It does not apply to funds from private donations distributed by SMEEF.*

IV. Capacity

All of the smaller organisations interviewed raised concerns over their limited internal capacity to develop projects, write funding applications, and provide detailed project reporting.

V. Reporting and claims projects

Overall, the project leads interviewed did not find the current level of project reporting too onerous and considered it appropriate for the size of funding received. Some interviewees highlighted that they were not sure how the reports and reported information was used once submitted.

VI. Wider impacts of projects

For many of the projects investigated, community engagement was a core objective of the project. Several project leads highlighted the opportunity SMEEF funding created for building collaborative partnerships with other organisations and academic institutes.

VII. SMEEF Donors

Several of the project leads interviewed raised concerns over the source of private funding and the important role SMEEF plays as a buffer between donor and project delivery. It was also raised by one project lead that SMEEF can play an important role in managing the expectations of funders with regards to what is a realistic outcome from the types of activity being carried out.

VIII. Future direction

Most project leads interviewed highlighted the need for multi-year funding to be able to deliver large-scale, impactful work that could meet the challenge of biodiversity decline. The need for funding that supports community-based activities, such as citizen science, face-to-face engagement with stakeholders, public presentations/knowledge exchange, and volunteer opportunities, was also raised. All project leads

interviewed recognised the potential role that SMEEF could play with regards to strategic compensation and marine nature positive initiatives

4. Online Survey Results

In total, 19 people completed the online survey which was circulated to grant recipients only. The breakdown of sector representation is shown in Figure 2.

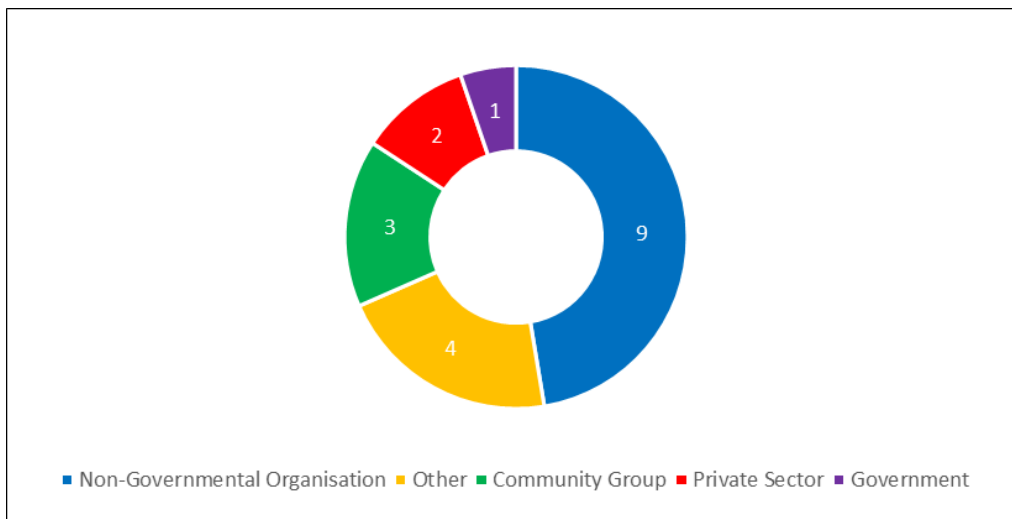


Figure 2: Breakdown of online survey participants by sector

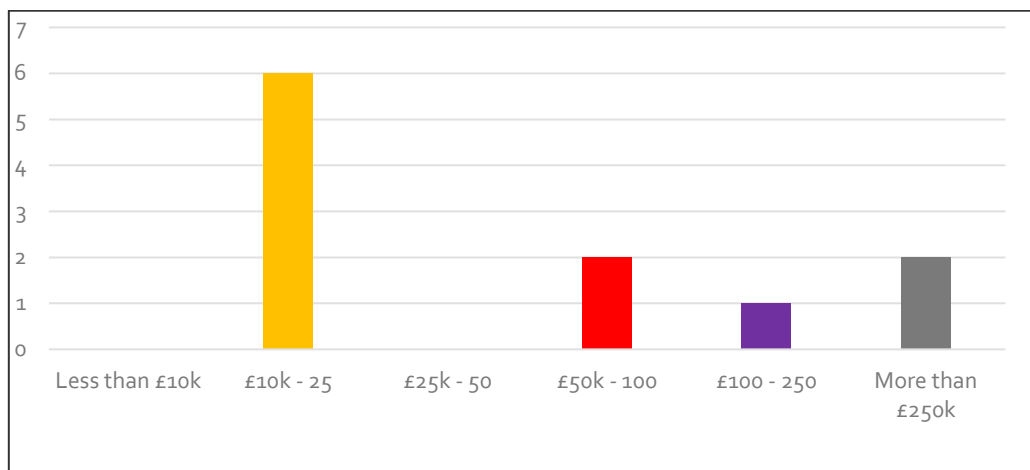


Figure 3: Responses to the question 'how much in total have you received from SMEEF?'

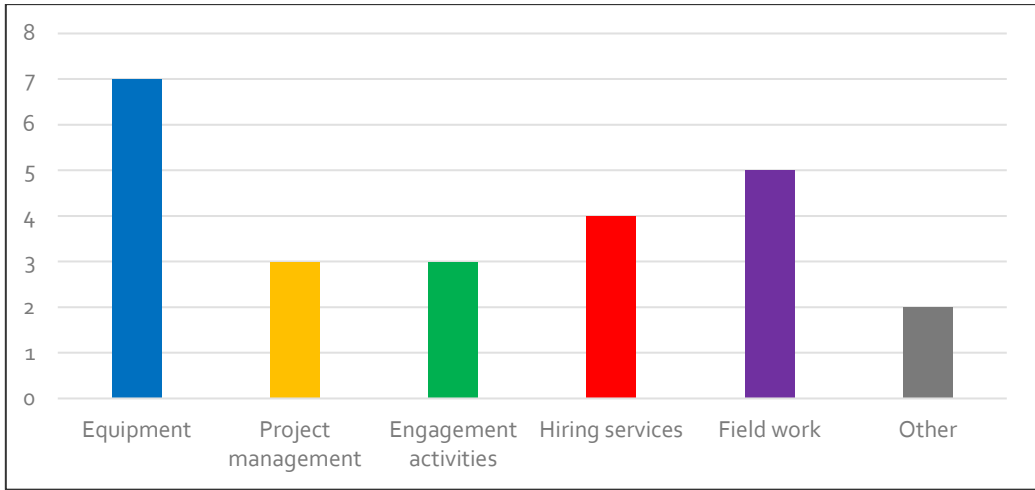


Figure 4: Responses to the question 'what was the money used for?'



Figure 5: Word cloud of responses describing SMEEF's application process

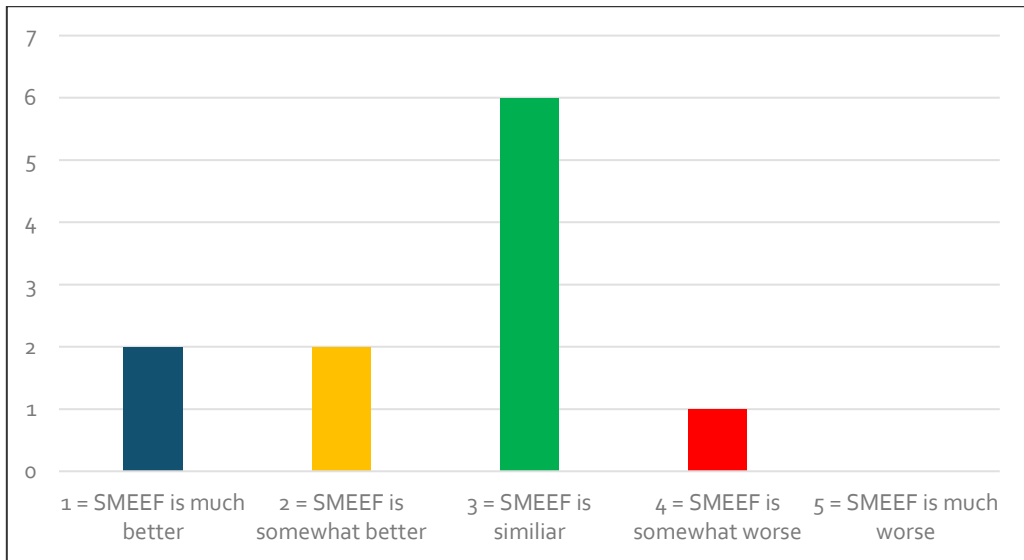


Figure 6: Responses to the question 'on a scale of 1 to 5 how does the SMEEF application process compare with other grant applications in your experience?'

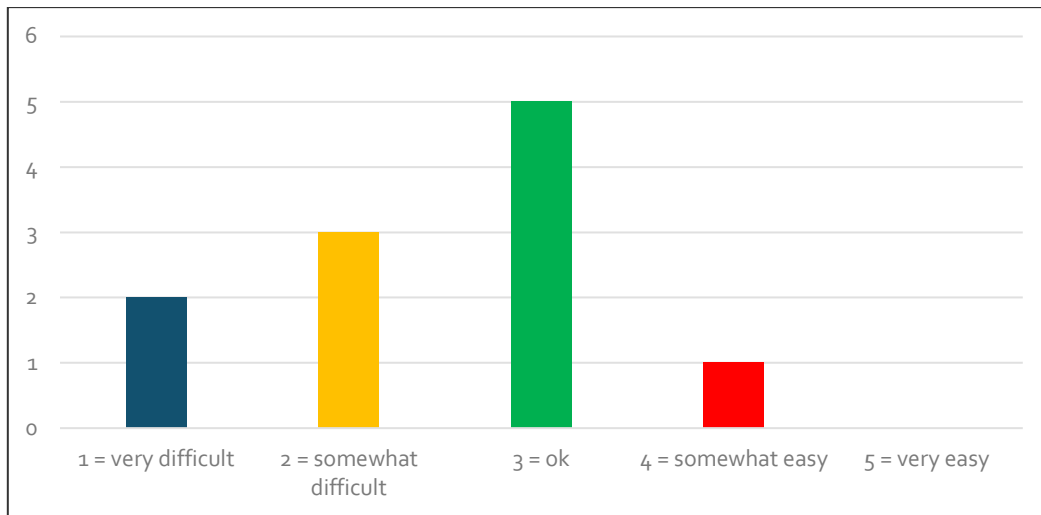


Figure 7: Breakdown of responses to the question: 'on a scale of 1 to 5, how difficult would it be to meet increased project reporting requirements, such as more detailed information on your environmental, social, and economic impact?'

5. Reporting and Monitoring

All projects are required to submit a final report at the end of the project, for which a standardised template is provided. Although it is acknowledged that the requested information may not be relevant to all projects, project leads are provided a list of contents to structure their reports, which includes:

- a project synopsis,
- information on any partnership working,
- summary details of restoration activity,
- any monitoring data (where possible),
- photographs of the project activity,
- information on public events,
- number of volunteers involved, and
- engagement with schools.
- SMEEF Steering Group, and report to donors on how their money has been used.

The following statement included in the SMEEF grant offer letter highlights to project leads how SMEEF may use the information submitted:

"All information submitted to SMEEF/NatureScot, including any spatial data, will be made freely available for reuse. The information will be used for SMEEF/NatureScot legitimate interests, which include, but are not limited to, informing the development of relevant strategies, policies and guidance. It may also be shared with research communities to support national research programmes on land use management to support biodiversity, and any other party NatureScot considers relevant."

You can also read the annual Impact Report [here](#).

6. Future monitoring and reporting

To support a more comprehensive approach, it is relevant to consider SMEEF’s ambition to contribute to wider policy delivery, including the Scottish Biodiversity Strategy, Scottish Seabird Strategy, and the Scottish Marine Nature Conservation Strategy, which set out overarching objectives and are supported by monitoring programmes. These wider activities provide a guiding framework for the development of SMEEF’s monitoring approach, so that the contribution of SMEEF to policy objectives can be articulated and improved over time. The objectives of SMEEF’s strategy will have important implications for the types of activities it funds, the indicators projects are reporting against, and their collective impact.

Table 1: Examples of SMEEF objectives and how these could steer decisions on what to fund, possible indicators, and expected outcomes.

Potential SMEEF Objectives	Examples of Funded Activities	Potential Indicators	Expected Outcomes
Overarching Objectives			
Environmental restoration	<ul style="list-style-type: none"> • Seagrass restoration • Coastal realignment • Oyster reef restoration • INNS eradication 	<ul style="list-style-type: none"> • Habitat area and health • Species abundance • Species diversity • Species presence/absence 	Healthier more diverse marine ecosystems. Improved ecosystem functioning and resilience.
Enhance ecosystem services	<ul style="list-style-type: none"> • Sand dune restoration • Seagrass restoration • Coastal realignment 	<ul style="list-style-type: none"> • Carbon sequestration • Coastal protection • Abundance of commercially valuable species 	Improved health of marine natural capital assets and ecosystem service flows that benefit nature and society.
Societal benefits	<ul style="list-style-type: none"> • Volunteer events (e.g., beach cleans) • Public presentations • Citizen science training 	<ul style="list-style-type: none"> • Human well-being • Ocean literacy (e.g., awareness of the marine environment) • Number of volunteers • Number of events 	Healthier, informed communities that benefit from and recognise the value of a healthy marine environment and practice good stewardship.
Supporting Objectives			
Improve understanding of environmental baseline	<ul style="list-style-type: none"> • Habitat survey • Species survey • Environmental data collection • Long-term data collection (monitoring) 	<ul style="list-style-type: none"> • Area of mapped habitat • Habitat quality • Species distribution / abundance 	Improved understanding of the current status of the marine environment and ecosystems. Improved understanding of ecological and environmental change over time and ability to assess the impact of restoration activities.
Research and development of restoration methods	<ul style="list-style-type: none"> • Developing and trialling innovative methods • Ground-truthing methods • Equipment development 	<ul style="list-style-type: none"> • Increased number of methods available for restoration work • Improved equipment • Peer-reviewed publications on methods and equipment 	Improved understanding and confidence in marine environmental restoration techniques.
Project development and capacity building	<ul style="list-style-type: none"> • Stakeholder engagement • Networking support • Project design / development • Training 	<ul style="list-style-type: none"> • Increased number of shovel-ready, fully costed projects • Increased collaboration / partnership working • Non-SMEEF funded projects resulting from initial project • Increased capacity (e.g., number of people, skills) to deliver marine restoration across Scotland 	A large, well-funded, and skilled workforce that can deliver meaningful and impactful restoration projects across the country at the scale required to make Scotland nature positive.

In addition to considering the options for SMEEF’s strategy, it is important to consider the capacity of project delivery groups to report on their work. A more resource intensive reporting priorities and monitoring strategy may be considered a barrier to some potential applicants. Striking a balance between the project delivery group’s capacity to collect, analyse, and report project data and SMEEF’s ambitions for demonstrating its impact will be important.

7. Implications of marine policy development in Scotland

The SBS is a key reference informing SMEEF’s funding priorities, however marine policy in Scotland is currently going through a significant period of evolution: the second version of the National Marine Plan is underway; a Marine Restoration Plan 2026-2045 (MRP) is about to start development, along with a library of marine restoration measures (LoM); and there are ongoing discussions on strategic compensation and the potential for a Scottish Marine Recovery Fund (MRF), driven by the anticipated establishment of Defra’s Marine Recovery Fund in England under the Energy Act 2023.

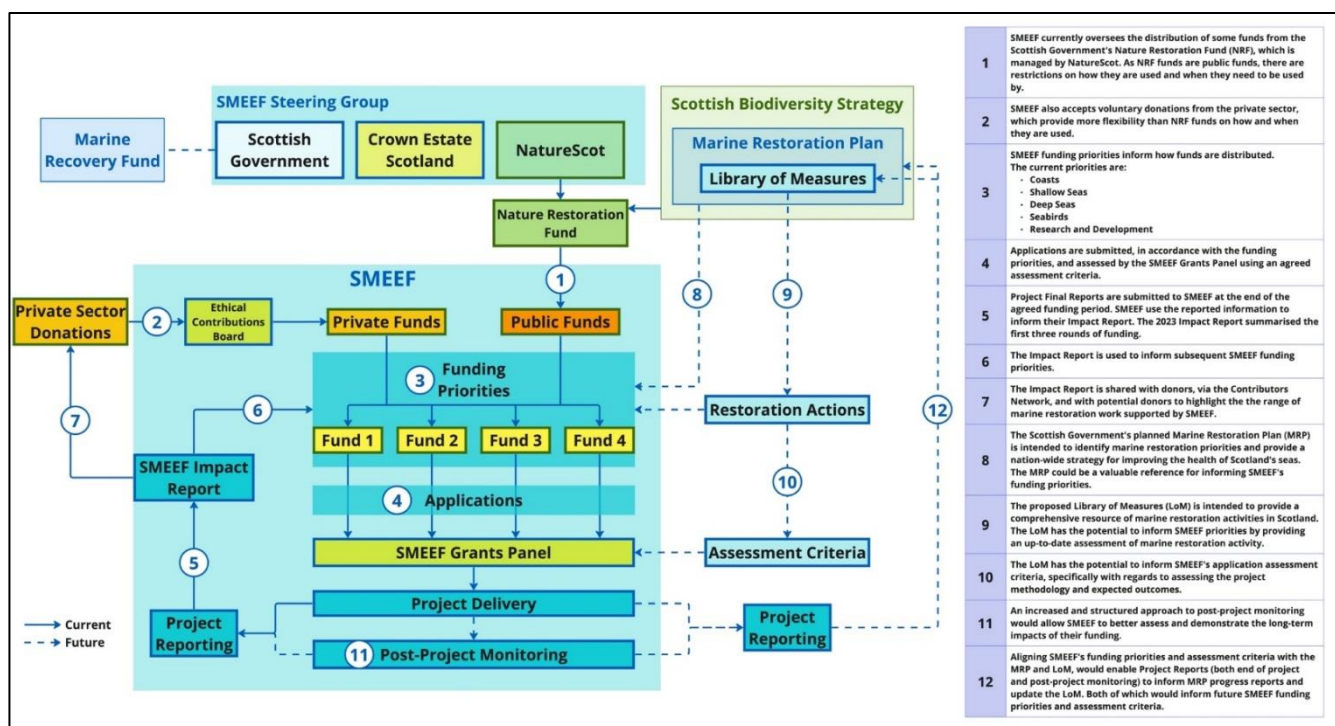


Figure 8: Conceptual model of SMEEF’s current structure (solid arrows) and potential linkages (dashed arrows) with the Scotland’s future Marine Restoration Plan, Library of Measures, and Marine Recovery Fund.

8. Some recommended next steps

Based on the findings from this project, the following suggested actions present opportunities for the future development of SMEEF:

- The development of the National Marine Plan 2, the Marine Restoration Plan, and the Library of Measures will be highly influential in the restoration of Scotland's marine environment. Aligning SMEEF's objectives and funding priorities with these strategies would elevate its role in the delivery of restoration activity and ensure the outcomes (i.e., impacts) of SMEEF's portfolio of projects supports Scotland's wider marine restoration targets.
- Consider the capacity within project delivery groups for delivering increased reporting requirements and engage early with project leads, prior to funding confirmation, to assess current capacity and develop an agreed project criteria to report against.
- In addition to assessing project capacity, reporting requirements should also be proportionate to amount of funding being awarded. For example, reporting requirements for small project grants should remain light-touch to ensure they are accessible to small organisations
- The commissioning of a more in-depth review of SMEEF's impact, every 3-5 years for example, that collates, analyses, and combines reported information from all funded projects (e.g., final project reports and post-project monitoring) should be considered. This assessment would allow SMEEF's longer-term impact, particularly with regards to environmental and 'legacy' impacts, to be determined.
- To ensure reporting is targeted and strategic, it is important to identify early which metrics SMEEF projects should report against. This will increase transparency in how reported information is used and ensure project reports align with the impact indicators used in SMEEF's annual and multi-year reporting.