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**Scottish Islands Federation  
Marine Litter Working Group  
2026 Interim Report to HIEF**



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## **Executive summary**

Jan–Mar 2026 was a focused “priority reset” period for MLWG: we consolidated member input and the evidence/advocacy picture and agreed a protected core of work that keeps progress moving under tighter capacity and funding conditions. That core protects three enabling capabilities — Evidence, Advocacy, and Comms & engagement — and uses them to deliver a small number of credible, seasonal exemplar flags that are visible, repeatable, and fundable.

Our SSEN Regional Community Benefit Fund and Crown Estate Scotland (CES) Community Capacity Grant bids were unsuccessful; we have treated those outcomes as a planning constraint for the next 90 days, whilst we capture lessons learned separately.

This report sets out the protected core, Spring/Summer exemplar priorities, minimum viable deliverables (realistic for MLDO capacity), and the pragmatic funding approach for the next 90 days.

## **Context**

Island communities carry a disproportionate marine litter burden, with practical constraints on sustained clean-up, waste handling, and visibility in statutory reporting. The momentum built through MLWG’s 2022–25 work (delivery exemplars, stronger evidence, and joined-up collaboration) sits on earlier island-led action and learning across the Scottish islands since the early 2000s. Jan–Mar 2026 then created a valuable window to engage members 1:1 — strengthening our shared platform for understanding the problem and for tackling both downstream delivery realities and upstream policy/funding solutions — whilst absorbing tighter funding conditions.

## **What we did (Jan–Mar 2026)**

- Ran a “clean slate” reset to frame choices for 2026–27.
- Held targeted 1:1 catch-ups with MLWG members to capture constraints, priorities and leverage points.
- Shared an interim synthesis at the February MLWG.
- Built the SSEN and CES bid outcomes (feedback pending) into planning assumptions.

## **What we heard**

Members consistently pointed to three priorities: protect the evidence base, maintain advocacy capacity, and treat communications as core infrastructure. The headline signals are:

1. Without credible island monitoring infrastructure, islands remain under-represented in statutory narratives and resourcing.
2. Partners and funders want a small number of credible, repeatable delivery exemplars.
3. Advocacy needs a repeatable “heartbeat” (not just reactive consultation responses). Even with reduced capacity, we will keep upstream asks ready-to-deploy — and resurface them with vigour as policy/funding windows open: (i) equity in implementation (island-proofed delivery mechanisms) and (ii) evidence visibility (monitoring infrastructure that makes island impacts legible in statutory reporting and resourcing decisions).
4. Comms is the multiplier: it turns evidence into influence and delivery into a fundable narrative.
5. Volunteer heroics cannot be our operating model: treating unpaid volunteers as a strategic solution is a burden shift, not a sustainable delivery model — and it weakens continuity, credibility, and resilience.
6. Island constraints are structural: capacity, access, logistics, infrastructure, and waste routes routinely make “mainland-standard” delivery assumptions fail. In practice, logistics and waste routes are a binding constraint — collection without viable routes just relocates the problem.

Proof / member voice: see Appendix A (linked at the bottom of this report) for selected quotes and the wider backing.

## **The three work packages**

We’ve framed these as three work packages (rather than a long list of tasks) because each one is a coherent bundle: a clear purpose, a small set of deliverables we can realistically commit to, and a credible story for partners and funders.

Together, they protect the minimum enabling capacity needed to keep MLWG moving.

Each work package is summarised below and then backed by a dedicated appendix (B, C, D).

### Case A — Evidence (monitoring infrastructure)

Core claim: without credible island monitoring infrastructure, islands stay invisible in statutory reporting, and policy/funding continues to misfire.

Critical nuance (pause): as noted in [MLWG update to members — waypoint report context + next steps \(17 Mar 2026\)](#), in the absence of funds to directly support the OSPAR scoping study (including sites and surveyors/monitors), this work is on hold pending funding and/or further updates from Marine Directorate. This means it is not currently a “flag in the ground” deliverable for the next 90 days.

Readiness position (so we can restart fast): keep the scoping study framed (inputs/outputs/decision points) and maintain a minimal candidate-site pathway + Island Surveyor Network concept ready to activate once funding/MD clarity lands.

Critical context: there are currently no OSPAR monitoring sites in the Scottish islands — even a small starter set is a high-leverage first step.

## Case B — Advocacy (consultations + external voice)

Core claim: the last 6–12 months of consultation work has created a reusable advocacy engine; if it is not maintained, we lose momentum and hard-won coherence.

Flag in the ground deliverable: a maintained advocacy heartbeat.

Critical context: we need to lock in the key lines on ICIAs, including the case for marine litter to be recognised as a “significantly different island effect”.

## Case C — Comms & engagement

Core claim: comms is not “nice to have”; it is the multiplier that makes evidence legible, makes advocacy land, and makes delivery fundable.

Flag in the ground deliverable: a lightweight comms plan that plugs MLWG into SIF channels.

Critical context: comms includes controlled, strategic publicity that creates the conditions for funding and political attention (handled carefully given local sensitivities).

## **Demonstrator model (why this matters beyond marine litter)**

Marine litter is a clear, practical test-case for the wider “island-proofing” challenge (across other fronts too, including housing etc etc): it makes visible how national policies and funding models can fail when they do not account for island realities (logistics, waste routes, small populations, limited services, and the cumulative burden on volunteers).

That is why we treat marine litter not only as an issue to fix, but as a model for how island solutions can be delivered and sustained: deliver a small number of exemplars, scale what works, repeat it reliably, and then build the capacity needed to sustain it. The demonstrator logic is strongest when Evidence, Advocacy, and Comms are maintained together — turning local delivery into credible evidence, evidence into influence, and influence into durable resourcing.

## **Conclusion**

This waypoint report is intended to give HIEF a clear, evidence-backed view of where MLWG has landed after the Jan–Mar 2026 priority reset: a protected core of work, a small set of exemplar flags, and a realistic near-term plan shaped by island constraints and capacity limits. We will continue to focus on delivery that produces decision-usable evidence, maintain a light advocacy heartbeat, and use comms as the multiplier so learning compounds. HIEF’s existing support remains a key anchor for this work, and we will continue to report transparently as the next 90 days of outputs land.

## **Appendices (linked)**

### Appendix A — Member voice quotes (selected)

For quick proof points (short quotes only), see: [Appendix A — Member voice quotes \(Jan–Mar 2026 1:1s\)](#).

## Appendix B — Case A (Evidence): monitoring pathway + capacity concept

Backing detail for Case A (OSPAR scoping, candidate site pathway, Island Surveyor Network concept): [Appendix B — Case A \(Evidence\): monitoring pathway + capacity concept \(OSPAR scoping\)](#).

## Appendix C — Case B (Advocacy): advocacy heartbeat + reusable engine

Backing detail for Case B (workflow, two headline asks, reusable briefing bundle): [Appendix C — Case B \(Advocacy\): advocacy heartbeat + reusable engine \(consultations\)](#).

## Appendix D — Case C (Comms & engagement): lightweight comms engine

Backing detail for Case C (series/storylines, asset reuse, cadence, routing into SIF channels): [Appendix D — Case C \(Comms & engagement\): lightweight comms engine \(SIF-linked\)](#).

## **Acknowledgements**

We gratefully acknowledge the financial support of HIEF in enabling this work, and the contributions of SIF and MLWG members who have given significant time and expertise through monthly MLWG meetings and 1:1 discussions. This input has been invaluable not only during the January–March discussion period, but also across the wider programme of work associated with bids, consultations, and ongoing engagement.

