Northern Ireland Environment Agency
www.doeni.gov.uk/niea

Klondyke Building
Cromac Avenue
Gasworks Business Park
Malone Lower
Belfast BT7 2JA

RECEIVED
18 JAN 2016
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Ms S.Wylie
Chief Executive
Belfast City Council
City Hall
BELFAST
Co. Down
BT1 5GS

Chief Executive's Office
Date 15/1/16
Seen by CX
Referred to

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|---|---|---|
| ACX | Corp Comms | Dem Serv |
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| Dev | F&R | H&ES |
| P&L | P&P | Other |

Ref SW47/1

Our Ref: SPA 019

Date: 14 January 2016

Dear Ms Wylie

**EC BIRDS DIRECTIVE: EAST COAST (NORTHERN IRELAND) MARINE SPECIAL PROTECTION AREA**

The purpose of this letter is to inform you that the Department is satisfied that the area shown on the attached map meets the criteria for classification as a Special Protection Area (SPA) under the terms of the European Community Directive of 2 April 1979 on the conservation of wild birds (79/409/EEC, codified as Directive 2009/147/EC).

This Directive requires Member States, including the UK, to have in place special measures to conserve the habitat of certain rare or vulnerable species of birds, or regularly occurring migratory bird species. Particular attention must be paid to the protection of wetlands these species use, especially wetlands of international importance.

As part of a UK-wide assessment of marine areas of significance for birds, a range of studies have been undertaken to identify our most important sites.

Species specific work on the East Coast of Northern Ireland has shown that this area qualifies as a Special Protection Area for the species shown in the citation. The site boundary has been informed using standardised approaches for each species to define the key marine area. The final boundary is an aggregation of these.

Further information on the UK marine SPA programme can be found on the website of the Joint Nature Conservation Committee which has coordinated this work (http://jncc.defra.gov.uk/).

The following documents are enclosed for your information:-

A citation showing the species for which the proposed SPA is considered to be of European importance;

A report on the Conservation Objectives of the proposed SPA;

A site map showing the waters within the boundary of the SPA;

A Special Places leaflet explaining the importance of the site for notable bird species.

Further information on the proposed SPA can be found at -
https://www.doeni.gov.uk/consultations

Any representations concerning the proposal to extend the boundary should be made in writing to the Department at the above address by ***14 April 2016***.

If you have any questions relating to this SPA or its implications for you, please write to, or telephone Maureen Gilroy on 02890569516 who will arrange for someone to contact you.

Yours sincerely

**STUART McDOUGALL**
Authorised Officer

**EC BIRDS DIRECTIVE: EAST COAST (NORTHEN IRELAND) MARINE SPECIAL PROTECTION AREA**

**Equality Impact Assessment**

Under Section 75 of the Northern Ireland Act 1998, public authorities have a statutory duty to promote equality of opportunity. Preliminary screening exercises have been undertaken, and it is considered that there are no significant implications for equality of opportunity as a result of these proposals.

**The Human Rights Act**

The Human Rights Act 1998 implements the European Convention on Human Rights. The 1998 Act makes it unlawful for any public authority to act in a way that is incompatible with these rights. The Department considers that the proposals detailed in this consultation package are compatible with the Human Rights Act 1998.

**Rural Proofing**

Rural proofing is a process to ensure that all relevant Government policies are examined carefully and objectively to determine whether or not they have a different impact in rural areas from that elsewhere, given the particular characteristics of rural areas, and where necessary, what policy adjustments might be made to reflect rural needs to ensure that, as far as possible, public services are accessible on a fair basis to the rural community. The proposals detailed in this consultation package are aimed at affording greater protection to our nationally important habitats and species through the designation of

Marine Special Protection Areas. It is important that these unique areas of the marine habitat are managed sustainably and promoted as a valuable social and economic asset.

**Freedom of Information Act 2000** – confidentiality of consultation responses

Following the end of the consultation, we shall publish a paper summarising the responses. Information you provide in your response to this consultation, including personal information, may be published or disclosed in accordance with the Freedom of Information Act 2000 (FOIA).

If you want the information that you provide to be treated as confidential, please tell us why but be aware that, under the FOIA, we cannot guarantee confidentiality.

If you are replying as an individual, the Department will process your personal data in accordance with the Data Protection Act 1998, and this will mean that if you request confidentiality, your personal information will not be disclosed to third parties.

**What happens next?**

Following the consultation, the Department will analyse and consider the information received and will publish a synopsis on these responses on the website. The decision whether or not to make the final classification will be made by the Minister of the Environment and the Secretary of State for Northern Ireland and will be informed by consultation responses.

Thank you for your help and participation in this consultation. Should you have any queries, please contact us to discuss further.

**EC DIRECTIVE 2009/147/EC on the Conservation of Wild Birds**

**PROPOSED EAST COAST (NORTHERN IRELAND) MARINE SPECIAL PROTECTION AREA**

*Area:* 96668.34 Ha *Geographic co-ordinates:* 54.03.00 N
06.07.00 W

**Unitary Authority** marine waters adjoining:
Belfast City Council
Antrim and Newtownabbey Borough Council
Mid and East Antrim Borough Council
Ards and North Down Borough Council
Newry, Mourne and Down District Council

**County:** adjoining County Antrim and County Down

**Site description:**
The proposed East Coast (Northern Ireland) Marine Special Protection Area includes coastal and near shore waters from Ringfad near Carnlough, Co. Antrim in the north, the marine area of Larne Lough, the marine area of Belfast Lough, waters around the Copleand Islands and offshore of the Ards Peninsula to Cloghan Head, near Ardglass in the south.

The SPA covers a diverse range of seabed habitats, from extensive coastal fringing reefs of various lithologies to the fine silt of inner Belfast Lough.

To the north of Belfast Lough, fringing reef is notable, with substantial areas of coarse sediments and boulders and cobbles offshore from Islandmagee. Further north, towards Ballygally and Carnlough, the glacial till dominates the seabed but also with important areas harbour maerl, a coralline algae (mostly *Phymatolithon calcareum*), known for its associated high biodiversity and for acting as a scallop nursery ground. Rippled sands and gravels are also notable between the relic drowned drumlins that are present off much of the 'Glens of Antrim' coastline. Bedrock outcrops with near vertical sides are found at the Maidens; these reefs and the surrounding sand banks form part of the designated Maidens SAC.

Within Belfast Lough muds grade into muddy sands toward the outer Lough, with extensive areas of cobbles and shell debris overlying the muddy sand. Part of the muddy sand in the outer Lough is bioturbated by Dublin Bay prawn (*Nephrops norvegicus*), and also harbour the Seapen *Virgularia mirabilis*. Topographically complex reef areas surround the Copeland Islands.

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To the south of Belfast Lough, the seabed off the Ards Peninsula is dominated by stony reef and mixed sands and gravels (often with a notable silt content). The gravelly sands support commercially harvestable seed mussel in geographically limited areas (affected by local hydrography), and further offshore support a scallop fishery (*Pecten maximus*). Mobile bedforms, such as extensive sand waves and banks, are found at Rigg Bank and extending south of the bank.

Offshore of Belfast Lough and off the Maidens Islands the seabed within the site reaches a depth of 125m.

The boundary adjoins the following existing Special Protection Areas –
Larne Lough SPA
Belfast Lough SPA
Outer Ards SPA
Copeland Islands SPA
Strangford Lough SPA

This site also subsumes the existing Belfast Lough Open Water SPA

The landward boundary for this marine area is the mean low water mark, medium tide.

The principal interests are as follows – marine area used by –
Non-breeding population of Great Crested Grebe
Non-breeding population of Red-throated Diver
Rafting Manx Shearwater in the breeding season originating from an adjoining colony
Foraging Sandwich, Common and Arctic Tern in the breeding season originating from adjoining tern colonies

The designation map shows the extent of the proposed East Coast (Northern Ireland) Marine Special Protection Area.

**Qualifying species:**

The subsumed Belfast Lough Open Water SPA was classified in 2009 at which time the site qualified for the wintering population of Great Crested Grebe.

The site qualifies under **Article 4.2** of the Directive (2009/147/EC) by regularly supporting internationally important populations of the following species:

| **Species relevant to Article 4.2** | **Count and Season** | **Period** | **% of population** |
|---|---|---|---|
| Great Crested Grebe<br>*Podiceps cristatus* | 2466 individuals<br>Non-breeding | 5 year mean (1991/92 – 1995/96) | 1.6% of the international biogeographical population |

Waterbird data from annual WeBS programme coordinated by BTO

In recent years the population of Great Crested Grebe on Belfast Lough Open Water SPA has declined. For the period 2008/09 – 2012/13, the mean Great Crested Grebe numbers were 737 wintering individuals (<1% of the international biogeographical population). Great Crested Grebe has been retained as a qualifying species for Belfast Lough as the population is still

notable (13.4% all-Ireland population) while the site can be of increased importance e.g. as a cold weather refuge. Retention of such site selection features is in line with agreed UK practice.

The site also qualifies under **Article 4.1** of the Directive (79/409/EEC) by supporting internationally important populations of the following species:

| **Annex I species** | **Count and Season** | **Period** | **% of population** |
|---|---|---|---|
| Red-throated Diver *Gavia stellata* | 142 individuals Non-breeding | 5 year mean (2006/07 – 2008/08) | 7.1 % of the all-Ireland population |

JNCC targeted site survey

More recently land-based surveys have been undertaken of movements of Red-throated Diver flying into Belfast Lough with matched counts from the County Antrim and County Down shorelines. For the period 2010/11 – 2014/15, the mean Red-throated Diver numbers were 121 wintering individuals (6% of the all-Ireland wintering population).

The site also qualifies under **Article 4.1** of the Directive (79/409/EEC) by supporting internationally important populations of the following species – figures relate to populations at adjoining breeding colonies:

| **Annex I species** | **Count and Season** | **Period** | **% of population** |
|---|---|---|---|
| Sandwich Tern *Thalasseus sandvicensis* | | | |
| Larne Lough SPA | 413 pairs Breeding | 5 year mean (2010 - 2014) | |
| Outer Ards SPA | 353 pairs Breeding | 5 year mean (2010 - 2014) | |
| Strangford Lough SPA | 890 pairs Breeding | 5 year mean (2010 - 2014) | |
| TOTAL | 1656 pairs Breeding | 5 year mean (2010 - 2014) | 44.8 % of the all-Ireland population |
| Common Tern *Sterna hirundo* | | | |
| Larne Lough SPA | 295 pairs Breeding | 5 year mean (2010 - 2014) | |
| Belfast Lough SPA | 243 pairs Breeding | 5 year mean (2010 - 2014) | |
| Strangford Lough SPA | 370 pairs Breeding | 5 year mean (2010 - 2014) | |
| TOTAL | 908 pairs Breeding | 5 year mean (2010 - 2014) | 21.6 % of the all-Ireland population |

| | | | |
|---|---|---|---|
| Arctic Tern<br>*Sterna paradisaea* | | | |
| Belfast Lough SPA | 53 pairs<br>Breeding | 5 year mean<br>(2010 - 2014) | |
| Outer Ards SPA | 141 pairs<br>Breeding | 5 year mean<br>(2010 - 2014) | |
| Copeland Islands SPA | 954 pairs<br>Breeding | 5 year mean<br>(2010 - 2014) | |
| Strangford Lough SPA | 203 pairs<br>Breeding | 5 year mean<br>(2010 - 2014) | |
| TOTAL | 1351 pairs<br>Breeding | 5 year mean<br>(2010 - 2014) | 38.6 % of the all-Ireland population |

Seabird data from annual site monitoring by various bodies and national seabird surveys coordinated by JNCC

The site also qualifies under **Article 4.2** of the Directive (79/409/EEC) by supporting internationally important populations of the following species – figures relate to population at adjoining breeding colonies:

| **Species relevant to Article 4.2** | **Count and Season** | **Period** | **% of population** |
|---|---|---|---|
| Manx Shearwater<br>*Puffinus puffinus* | 4800 pairs<br>Breeding | 2000–2002 | 1.7 % of the international biogeographical population |

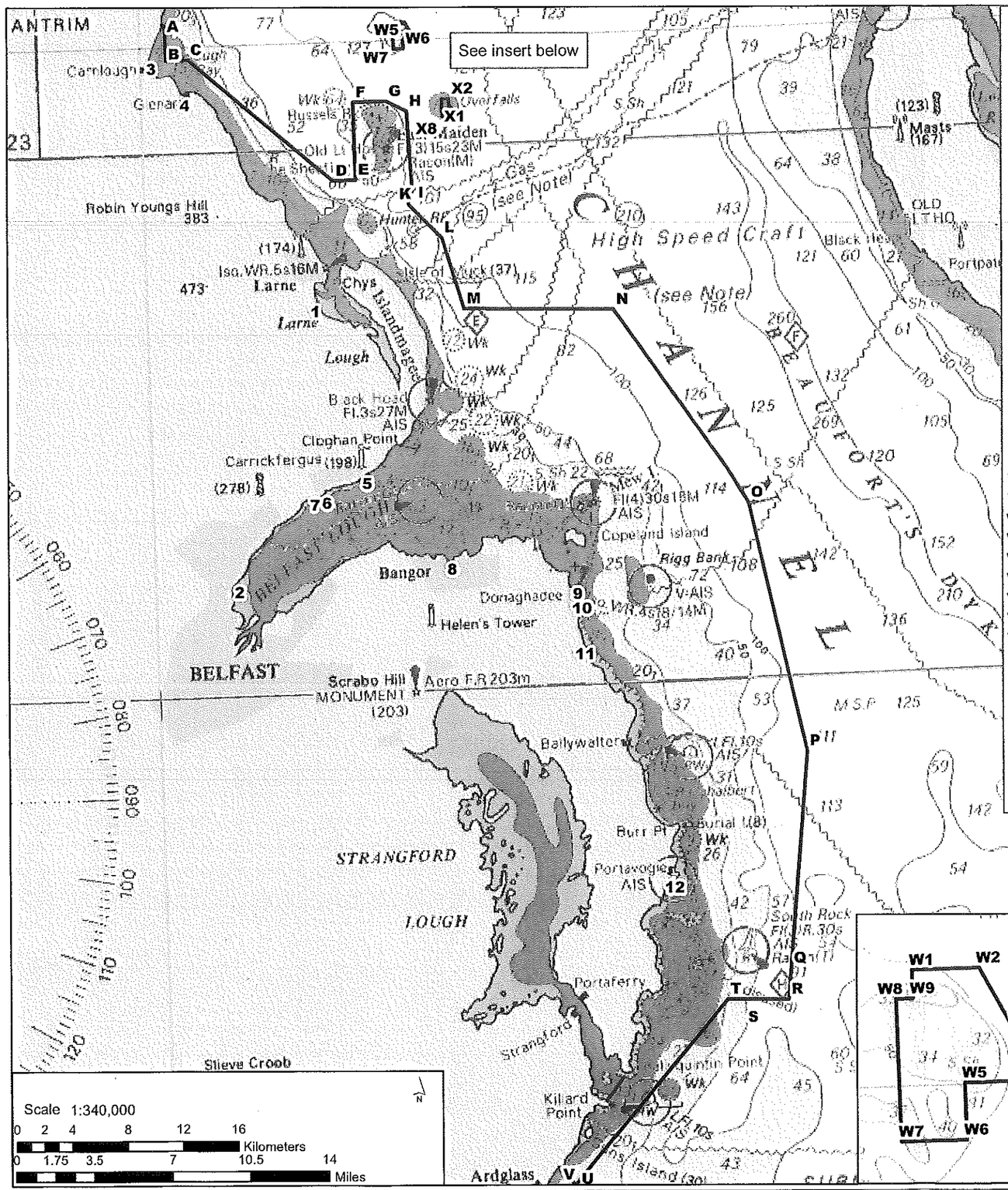
Seabird data from site monitoring by Copeland Bird Observatory and national seabird surveys coordinated by JNCC

The site also qualifies under **Article 4.2** of the Directive (79/409/EEC) by supporting internationally important populations of the following species:

| **Species relevant to Article 4.2** | **Count and Season** | **Period** | **% of population** |
|---|---|---|---|
| Eider Duck<br>*Somateria mollissima* | 3126 individuals<br>Nopn-breeding | 5 year mean<br>(2010/11 – 2014/15) | 0.30 % of the international biogeographical population<br>> 90 % of the all-Ireland population |

Waterbird data from annual WeBS programme coordinated by BTO

# PROPOSED EAST COAST (NORTHERN IRELAND) MARINE




| | Lat | Long |
|---|---|---|
| A | 55.013786 | -5.972275 |
| B | 54.991655 | -5.972275 |
| C | 54.991655 | -5.947275 |
| D | 54.911101 | -5.788942 |
| E | 54.911101 | -5.763942 |
| F | 54.961100 | -5.763943 |
| G | 54.961104 | -5.727227 |
| H | 54.954203 | -5.704236 |
| I | 54.902480 | -5.700766 |
| J | 54.902372 | -5.705609 |
| K | 54.894434 | -5.705609 |
| L | 54.872212 | -5.669498 |
| M | 54.826133 | -5.647088 |
| N | 54.822222 | -5.480343 |
| O | 54.694978 | -5.338985 |
| P | 54.533887 | -5.285087 |
| Q | 54.395105 | -5.313557 |
| R | 54.374976 | -5.317669 |
| S | 54.376107 | -5.366476 |
| T | 54.376537 | -5.385273 |
| U | 54.266853 | -5.552436 |
| V | 54.261106 | -5.561159 |
| W1 | 55.011100 | -5.713943 |
| W2 | 55.011100 | -5.702524 |
| W3 | 55.005353 | -5.697277 |
| W4 | 54.999989 | -5.697277 |
| W5 | 54.999989 | -5.705610 |
| W6 | 54.994434 | -5.705610 |
| W7 | 54.994434 | -5.716721 |
| W8 | 55.008322 | -5.716721 |
| W9 | 55.008322 | -5.713943 |
| X1 | 54.961101 | -5.663943 |
| X2 | 54.961101 | -5.655610 |
| X3 | 54.955545 | -5.655610 |
| X4 | 54.955545 | -5.652899 |
| X5 | 54.952767 | -5.652832 |
| X6 | 54.952767 | -5.655610 |
| X7 | 54.950075 | -5.655610 |
| X8 | 54.949990 | -5.663943 |

## PROPOSED EAST COAST (NORTHERN IRELAND) MARINE SPECIAL PROTECTION AREA

EC Site Code: UK9020320

SITE BOUNDARY: The Special Protection Area (SPA) includes all the marine area landward of the red line to the mean low water mark. In additon to the exluded areas noted below, the site also excludes the Strangford Lough SPA (blue line boundary)

AREA OF SPA: 96668.34 Ha

SITE LATITUDE: 54 03 00N
SITE LONGITUDE: 06 07 00W

COUNCIL AREA: marine waters adjoining:
BELFAST CITY COUNCIL, ANTRIM AND NEWTOWNABBEY BOROUGH COUNCIL, MID AND EAST ANTRIM BOROUGH COUNCIL, ARDS AND NORTH DOWN BOROUGH COUNCIL and NEWRY, MOURNE AND DOWN DISTRICT COUNCIL

COUNTY: adjoining
COUNTY ANTRIM AND COUNTY DOWN

**Special Protection Area**
**Directive 2009/147/EC codified version of Directive 79/409/EEC as amended**

**Classified by the Minister for the Department of the Environment**

**Date:**_____

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Included areas: The following areas are included within the SPA

1: North Glynn Lagoon (Larne Lough area)
2: Whitehouse Lagoon (Belfast Lough area)

Excluded areas: The following constructed features are not included within the SPA

Existing piers, jetties and elevated structures extending beyond the mean low water mark
3: Carnlough Harbour
4: Glenarm Harbour
5: Kilroot 'harbour'
6: Carrickfergus Harbour
7: Carrickfergus Marina
8: Bangor Harbour and Marina including the Long Hole
9: Donaghadee Harbour
10: Copelands (Donaghadee) Marina
11: Millisle lagoon and pool
12: Portavogie Harbour

# East Coast Marine Special Protection Area

Sandwich Tern (Laurie Campbell)

A Special Protection Area (SPA) is a designation under the European Union Directive on the Conservation of Wild Birds. Under the Directive, Member States of the European Union have a duty to safeguard the habitats of migratory birds and certain particularly threatened birds.

Arctic Tern (Laurie Campbell)

With the correct management, SPAs have been shown to make a significant contribution to the conservation needs of these notable species, together with other species using the designated sites. Collectively they provide a network of important sites at regional, national and international scales.

The East Coast Marine SPA has been selected because of the important populations of Sandwich, Common and Arctic Tern that feed there during the breeding season, flying from adjoining designated breeding colonies in Larne Lough, Belfast Lough, Outer Ards, Copeland Islands and Strangford Lough SPAs.

The Tern species are migratory visitors, coming to these east coast sites to breed. After breeding, Sandwich Tern spend our winter around the coasts of western Mediterranean as well as western and southern Africa, although increasingly some birds are present through the winter.

Arctic Tern enjoy a second summer in the southern hemisphere around the Antarctic Coast, an annual round trip of approximately 100,000 km. Common Tern also avoid the winter blues by spending our winter in coastal waters around southern Africa.

The area is also of importance for the Manx Shearwater population breeding on Copeland Islands SPA. While this species can travel substantial distances for purposes of feeding, waters closer to the colony are used for 'rafting', typically in the evenings, waiting for nightfall when they can safely return to their nest burrows. This species migrates to the south Atlantic during our winter.

Outside the breeding season, the area supports important populations of Red-throated Diver, Great Crested Grebe and Eider Duck.

Great Crested Grebe
(John Doherty)

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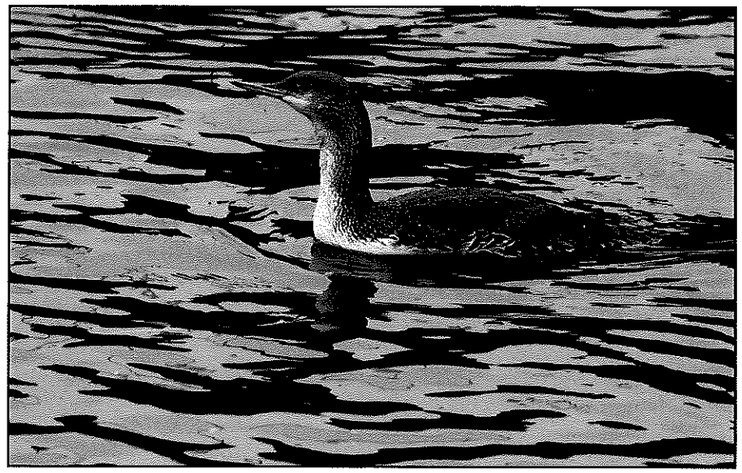


Red-throated Diver
(Geoff Campbell)

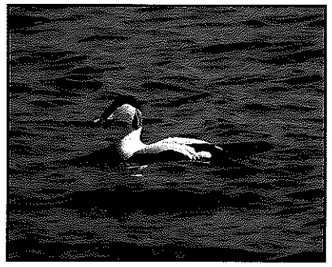
The population of Great Crested Grebe on Belfast Lough is thought, at least in part, to be the breeding birds from Lough Neagh.

The move from inland freshwater breeding sites to coastal wintering locations is typical for this fish-eating species.

Red-throated Diver are relatively common in our coastal waters, migrating here from their breeding grounds in Iceland and northern Europe. They are particularly vulnerable to disturbance.

The population of non-breeding Eider Duck in the SPA is the largest aggregation for this species in Ireland. Made up of birds that breed around the Antrim/Down coast, the population is undoubtedly supplemented by birds coming from elsewhere around our coast and probably from Scotland also.

The purpose of the SPA is to ensure that waters and seafloor habitats found in the East Coast Marine area are managed to meet all the needs of these species while they are with us and once they migrate elsewhere, that the habitats they use are maintained year-round.



Eider Duck (Ian Enlander)

The East Coast Marine area is of course a very busy place with a lot of human activities including businesses, industry, shipping, commercial fishing and shellfish production and land and water-based recreational activities.

The SPA designation means that any new projects, developments or other significant activities (including changes to existing activities) within or beyond the site are assessed to ensure they will have no direct or indirect impacts on these bird populations or the habitats on which they depend.

The objective is to achieve a site that continues to benefit our society, but not at the cost of losing these internationally important bird populations.

**Northern Ireland Environment Agency aims to work with site owners and users to ensure that special places like the East Coast Marine Area are protected for the future.**

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# EAST COAST MARINE - SPECIAL PROTECTION AREA (SPA)

## UK9020320

# CONSERVATION OBJECTIVES

Document Details

| | |
|---|---|
| Title | East Coast Marine SPA Conservation Objectives |
| Prepared By | *Ian Enlander* |
| Approved By | *Mark Wright* |
| Date Effective From | |
| Version Number | *V1* |
| Next Review Date | January 2020 |
| Contact | cdp@doeni.gov.uk |

Revision History:

| Version | Date | Summary of Changes | Initials | Changes Marked |
|---|---|---|---|---|
| V1 | April 2015 | Draft document | IE | CO for proposed SPA |
| | | | | |
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**Site relationship**

To fully understand the site conservation requirements for this site it may be necessary to also refer to other site Conservation Objectives

The boundary adjoins the following existing Special Protection Areas –
Larne Lough SPA
Belfast Lough SPA
Outer Ards SPA
Copeland Islands SPA
Strangford Lough SPA

It also subsumes the existing Belfast Lough Open Water SPA

The boundary also adjoins the following existing Ramsar sites –
Larne Lough Ramsar
Belfast Lough Ramsar
Outer Ards Ramsar
Strangford Lough Ramsar

See also Boundary Rationale

## 1. INTRODUCTION

EU Member States have a clear responsibility under the Habitats and Birds Directives[1] to ensure that all habitats and species of Community Interest are maintained or restored to Favourable Conservation Status (FCS). Natura 2000 sites have a crucial role to play in achieving this overall objective since they are the most important core sites for these species and habitats. Each site must therefore be managed in a way that ensures it contributes as effectively as possible to helping the species and habitats for which it has been designated reach a favourable conservation status within the EU.

To ensure that each Natura 2000 site contributes fully to reaching this overall target of FCS, it is important to set clear conservation objectives for each individual site. These should define the desired state, within that particular site, of each of the species and habitat types for which the site was designated.

Once a site has been included in the Natura 2000 network, Member States are required to implement, on each site, the necessary conservation measures which correspond to the ecological requirements of the protected habitat types and species of Community Interest present, according to Article 6.1 of the Habitats Directive. They must also prevent any damaging activities that could significantly disturb those species and habitats (Article 6.2) and to protect the site from new potentially damaging plans and projects likely to have a significant effect on a Natura 2000 site (Article 6.3, 6.4).

Conservation measures can include both site-specific measures (i.e. management actions and/or management restrictions) and horizontal measures that apply to many Natura 2000 sites over a larger area (e.g. measures to reduce nitrate pollution or to regulate hunting or resource use).

In Northern Ireland, terrestrial/inter-tidal Natura 2000 sites are usually underpinned by the designation of an Area of Special Scientific Interest (ASSI) under the Environment (NI) Order 2002 (as amended).

## 2. ROLE OF CONSERVATION OBJECTIVES

Conservation Objectives have a role in

- Conservation Planning and Management – guide management of sites, to maintain or restore the habitats and species in favourable condition

- Assessing Plans and Projects, as required under Article 6(3) of the Habitats Directive - Habitats Regulations Assessments (HRA) are required to assess proposed plans and projects in light of the site's conservation objectives.

- Monitoring and Reporting – Provide the basis for assessing the condition of a feature, the factors that affect it and the actions required.

[1] 92/43/EEC and 2009/147/EC (codified version of Directive 79/409/EEC as amended)

## 3. DEFINITION OF FAVOURABLE CONSERVATION STATUS

Favourable Conservation Status is defined in Articles 1(e) and 1(i) of the Habitats Directive:

The conservation status of a natural habitat is the sum of the influences acting on it and its typical species that may affect its long-term natural distribution, structure and functions as well as the long term survival of its typical species. The conservation status of a natural habitat will be taken as favourable when:

- Its natural range and areas it covers within that range are stable or increasing, and
- The specific structure and functions which are necessary for its long-term maintenance exist and are likely to continue to exist for the foreseeable future, and
- The conservation status of its typical species is favourable as defined in Article 1(i).

For species, favourable conservation status is defined in Article 1(i) as when:

- population dynamics data on the species concerned indicate that it is maintaining itself on a long-term basis as a viable component of its natural habitats, and;
- the natural range of the species is neither being reduced nor is likely to be reduced for the foreseeable future, and;
- there is, and will probably continue to be, a sufficiently large habitat to maintain its population on a long term basis.

### 3.1 DEFINITION OF FAVOURABLE CONDITION

Favourable Condition is defined as **"the target condition for an interest feature in terms of the abundance, distribution and/or quality of that feature within the site"**.

The standards for favourable condition (Common Standards) have been developed by JNCC and are applied throughout the UK. Achieving Favourable Condition on individual sites will make an important contribution to achieving Favourable Conservation Status across the Natura 2000 network.

## 4 GENERAL INFORMATION

Council bodies - marine waters adjoining:
Belfast City Council
Antrim and Newtownabbey Borough Council
Mid and East Antrim Borough Council
Ards and North Down Borough Council
Newry, Mourne and Down District Council

**County:** adjoining County Antrim and County Down

*Area:* 96668.34 Ha *Geographic co-ordinates:* 54.03.00 W
06.07.00 N

The principal interests are as follows – marine area used by -

- Wintering populations of Red-throated Diver and Eider Duck
- Rafting Manx Shearwater originating from an adjoining colony
- Foraging Sandwich, Common and Arctic Tern originating from adjoining tern colonies

## 5 SUMMARY SITE DESCRIPTION

The East Coast (Northern Ireland) Marine Special Protection Area includes coastal and near shore waters from Ringfad near Carnlough, Co. Antrim in the north, the marine area of Larne Lough, the marine area of Belfast Lough, waters around the Copeland Islands and offshore of the Ards Peninsula to Cloghan Head, near Ardglass in the south.

The SPA covers a diverse range of seabed habitats, from extensive coastal fringing reefs of various lithologies to the fine silt of inner Belfast Lough.

To the north of Belfast Lough, fringing reef is notable, with substantial areas of coarse sediments and boulders and cobbles offshore from Islandmagee. Further north, towards Ballygally and Carnlough, the glacial till dominates the seabed but also with important areas harbour maerl, a coralline algae (mostly *Phymatolithon calcareum*), known for its associated high biodiversity and for acting as a scallop nursery ground. Rippled sands and gravels are also notable between the relic drowned drumlins that are present off much of the 'Glens of Antrim' coastline. Bedrock outcrops with near vertical sides are found at the Maidens; these reefs and the surrounding sand banks are form part of the designated Maidens SAC.

Within Belfast Lough muds grade into muddy sands toward the outer Lough, with extensive areas of cobbles and shell debris overlying the muddy sand. Part of the muddy sand in the outer Lough is bioturbated by Dublin Bay prawn (*Nephrops norvegicus*), and also harbour the Seapen *Virgularia mirabilis*. Topographically complex reef areas surround the Copeland Islands.

To the south of Belfast Lough, the seabed off the Ards Peninsula is dominated by stony reef and mixed sands and gravels (often with a notable silt content). The gravelly sands support commercially harvestable seed mussel in geographically limited areas (affected by local hydrography), and further offshore support a scallop fishery (*Pecten maximus*). Mobile bedforms, such as extensive sand waves and banks, are found at Rigg Bank and extending south of the bank.

Offshore of Belfast Lough and off the Maidens Islands the seabed within the site reaches a depth of 125m.

### 5.1 BOUNDARY RATIONALE

The SPA represents a series of merged marine areas defined by a number of studies into use made of the marine area along the East Coast by selected species of waterbird and seabird.

Targeted survey work has identified an important area for non-breeding Red-throated Diver in the Belfast Lough area.

In addition a marine extension to the Copeland Islands SPA has been defined to reflect usage of the marine area by rafting Manx Shearwater originating from the Copeland colony.

Finally, a number of marine areas have been identified as important for a range of foraging tern species originating from adjoining tern colonies designated as part of the following existing Special Protection Areas -

Larne Lough SPA
Belfast Lough SPA
Outer Ards SPA
Copeland Islands SPA
Strangford Lough SPA

All of the above marine areas overlap to a greater or lesser extent. The SPA boundary subsumes all of these. In addition the SPA boundary subsumes the existing Belfast Lough Open Water SPA.

The landward boundary for this marine area is the MEAN LOW WATER MARK.

In addition to the designation map which shows the extent of the East Coast (Northern Ireland) Marine Special Protection Area, maps are also included for information purposes showing the marine areas used by each of the important bird populations.

## 6 SPA SELECTION FEATURES

| Feature Type | Feature | Population | Population at time of designation (ASSI) | Population at time of designation (SPA) | SPA Review population | Common Standards Monitoring baseline |
|---|---|---|---|---|---|---|
| Species | Great Crested Grebe wintering population[a] | 1646 individuals (5 year average 1995-2000) | N/A | 1677 individuals – wintering | | |
| Species | Red-throated Diver | 142 individuals 5 year mean (2006/07 – 2008/08) | | 142 individuals 5 year mean (2006/07 – 2008/08) | | |
| Species | Sandwich Tern | 1656 pairs Breeding 5 year mean (2010 - 2014) | | 1656 pairs Breeding 5 year mean (2010 - 2014) | | |
| Species | Common Tern | 908 pairs Breeding 5 year mean (2010 - 2014) | | 908 pairs Breeding 5 year mean (2010 - 2014) | | |
| Species | Arctic Tern | 1351 pairs Breeding 5 year mean (2010 - 2014) | | 1351 pairs Breeding 5 year mean (2010 - 2014) | | |
| Species | Manx Shearwater | 4800 pairs Breeding 2000–2002 | | | | |
| Species | Eider Duck | 3126 individuals | | | | |

| | | | | | | |
|---|---|---|---|---|---|---|
| | | Wintering 5 year mean (2010/11 – 2014/15) | | | | |
| Habitat[l] | Habitat extent | | | | | |
| Roosting /loafing sites[l] | locations of sites | | | | | |

Table 1. List of SPA selection features.

[l] Habitat and roost sites are not a selection feature but are a factor and more easily treated as if they were a feature.

**Notes on SPA features – may not be applicable to all SPAs**

The above table lists all relevant qualifying species for this site. As the identification of SPA features has and continues to evolve, species may have different status but all should be considered in the context of any HRA process. Ultimately all SPAs will be renotified to formalise species features.

[a] – species cited in current SPA citation and listed on current N2K dataform

[b] – species selected post SPA designation through UK SPA Review 2001

[c] – species highlighted as additional qualifying features through the UK SPA Review 2015 or the UK marine SPA programmes.

## 6.1. ADDITIONAL ASSI SELECTION FEATURES

Note that as the site is entirely below the low water mark, none falls within the adjoining ASSI designations. As such there are no additional ASSI features but see section 9.1.

## 7. CONSERVATION OBJECTIVES

The Conservation Objectives for this site are:

***To maintain each feature in favourable condition.***

For each feature there are a number of component objectives which are outlined in the tables below. For each feature there are a series of attributes and measures which form the basis of *Condition Assessment*. The results of this will determine whether a feature is in favourable condition, or not. The feature attributes and measures are found in the attached annexes.

## 8. EAST COAST (NORTHERN IRELAND) MARINE SPA CONDITION ASSESSMENT 2014

Refer to the individual adjoining SPA Condition Assessments for further information – these are contained in the most recent conservation objectives for each of the sites. Relevant sites are

Larne Lough SPA
Belfast Lough SPA
Belfast Lough Open Water SPA
Outer Ards SPA
Copeland Islands SPA
Strangford Lough SPA

## 9 SPA SELECTION FEATURE OBJECTIVES

To maintain or enhance the population of the qualifying species
To maintain or enhance the range of habitats utilised by the qualifying species
To ensure that the integrity of the site is maintained;
To ensure there is no significant disturbance of the species and
To ensure that the following are maintained in the long term:

- Population of the species as a viable component of the site
- Distribution of the species within site
- Distribution and extent of habitats supporting the species
- Structure, function and supporting processes of habitats supporting the species

## SPA SELECTION FEATURE OBJECTIVES

| Feature | Component Objective |
|---|---|
| Great Crested Grebe wintering population | As above |
| Red-throated Diver wintering population | As above |
| Sandwich Tern breeding season | As above |
| Common Tern breeding season | As above |
| Arctic Tern breeding season | As above |
| Manx Shearwater breeding season | As above |
| Eider Duck wintering population | As above |
| Habitat extent | Maintain the extent of main habitat components subject to natural processes |
| Roosting/loafing sites | Maintain all locations of sites. |

Table 4. SPA Component objectives

### 9.1 ADDITIONAL ASSI SELECTION FEATURE OBJECTIVES

See Conservation Objectives for adjoining SPAs for selection feature objectives. These may be relevant to the present site. Relevant sites are -

Larne Lough SPA
Belfast Lough SPA
Outer Ards SPA
Copeland Islands SPA
Strangford Lough SPA

## 10. MANAGEMENT CONSIDERATIONS

***Owner/Occupier's*** – (to be used to identify any key management considerations arising from ownership e.g. owners/organisations having an obvious bearing on conservation matters or from management agreements).

Key landowners, leasees and other users within the SPA, relevant to the site management, include Crown Estate Commissioners, local Councils (Belfast City Council, Antrim and Newtownabbey Borough Council, Mid and East Antrim Borough Council, Ards and North Down District Council, Newry, Mourne and Down District Council), Belfast Harbour Commissioners, Department of Agriculture and Rural Development Fisheries Division and shellfish operators, together with commercial shipping operators. There may be conflicts of interest between the requirements of individual/organisations, both within and adjacent to the SPA, and the site management needs.

Consideration must also be given to all land and sea based activities which have a bearing on site quality. This includes activities influencing water quality, ecological communities and disturbance.

There are a large number of significant commercial operations adjoining the marine area which may impact upon the SPA. Many of these are regulated through planning, relevant discharge and marine licensing arrangements. There is no evidence at present that any of these activities are having an adverse impact on the site features.

An assessment of the site boundary against commercial fisheries activity suggests that activity within the site tends to be inshore at Islandmagee, around the Copeland Islands, along the Outer Ards and towards the southern section of the site. Given that these sites are already important and of sufficient quality to support the birds, it may be reasonable to assume that current fishing in many of these areas is largely compatible with the birds' interest. However in cases where a type and level of fishing activity might impact upon the birds, a review may be needed so that authorities can establish the extent to which the fishing activities do influence the birds' interests. A fuller assessment of the distribution of fishing activities and the relationship between commercial stocks and site feature prey requirements will be undertaken.

## 11. MAIN THREATS, PRESSURES, ACTIVITES WITH IMPACTS ON THE SITE OR SITE FEATURES

The list below is not exhaustive, but deals with the most <u>likely</u> factors that are either affecting the East Coast (Northern Ireland) Marine SPA, or could affect it in the future. Factors affecting the features within the adjoining ASSI are also considered.

**<u>Generic site/feature issues</u>**

| No | Issue | Threat/comments | Local considerations | Action |
|---|---|---|---|---|
| 2 | Aquaculture | Disturbance is a minor consideration unless carried out deliberately to minimise losses to shell-feeding waterfowl. Alteration of natural sub-littoral communities through seeding, maintenance, harvesting, | Licensed aquaculture areas in Larne Lough and Belfast Lough especially. | Liaise with DARD Fisheries Division. Assess all license applications individually. Current extent of licences may significantly alter seabed |

| | | | | |
|---|---|---|---|---|
| | | dredging/control of pest species. Naturalisation of introduced species – both the shellfish themselves and associated species e.g. algae and disease vectors. | | conditions. Consider the collective impact. |
| 6 | Boating-shipping activity – commercial | Disturbance and potential for impact from high-speed shipping. | Major port facility at Larne and shipping channel at Larne Lough and Belfast Lough. These are long-established activities. Significant commercial fisheries activity at Portavogie. Smaller commercial harbours at Carnlough, Glenarm, Ballylumford, Carrickfergus, Bangor, Donaghadee and Ballywalter. | Formal consultation likely relating to new schemes. Consider the collective impact. |
| 7 | Boating activity – recreational | Disturbance and potential for impact especially from jet skies. Generally relevant to particularly sensitive areas within site. | Sailing clubs and/or facilities at Carnlough, Glenarm, Larne, Magheramourne Carrickfergus, Holywood, Cultra, Donaghadee, Ballywalter. Additional slipways and quays. | Liaise with appropriate authority with codes of good practice, zoning and use of by-laws as necessary. Consider the collective impact. |
| 12 | Dredging | Generally only an issue in relation to commercial shipping channels. Issues include disturbance to birds, disturbance to seabed, remobilisation of contaminated sediment and spoil dumping zones. | Ongoing capital dredging programme maintains shipping channel. Established ongoing maintenance programme. | Liaise with port authority and licensing bodies as required with regard to water quality issues and pollution incidents. |
| 14 | Fishing – commercial or recreational | Minimal disturbance consideration but may represent 'competition' for piscivorous birds. Represents a net loss to the system in terms of biomass. | Most commercial activity related to aquaculture. Current position unclear but there is little or no overlap between commercial stock and tern prey species. Recreational fishing not deemed to be a problem. | Liaise with DARD and fishing authority as required. Liaise with angling clubs as required. |
| 16 | Habitat extent – open water | Loss likely to be limited but expansion of commercial port facilities can impact on key localities. | Ongoing and further planned harbour developments will reduce open water area. Probably insignificant. | Assess planning and marine licensing applications. Consider the collective impact. |
| 18 | Habitat quality – open water | Alteration of habitat quality through diminution of water quality or invasive species. | Historically impacted by industrial and sewerage effluent. Vulnerable to pollution incidents from both industry and shipping. | Assess planning and marine licensing applications. Deal with invasive alien species by preventing their spread or reducing their impact. Liaise with Environmental Protection as required with regard to water quality issues and pollution incidents. Consider the collective impact. |
| 21 | Introduced species | Range of threats from loss of habitat, feeding competition, disease, hosting species presenting a threat outside of the site. | Not evident but given nature of the site, could be an issue through commercial shipping and aquaculture. | Liaise with appropriate authority. Consider feasibility of elimination. Participate in national/international initiatives. |
| | Marine | Potential for disturbance and direct | No site related proposals at time | Assess planning and |

| | | | | |
|---|---|---|---|---|
| | renewable energy developments | impact to terns in flight and actively feeding (diving) | of writing. Potential for impact from schemes elsewhere | marine licensing applications. To be addressed through HRA process. |
| 24 | Recreational activities. | Disturbance is the main consideration | Open water has been heavily used for recreational activities over long timescale. Cumulative disturbance impacts (e.g. boating, wildfowlers etc) may be a significant factor for wintering bird populations | Liaise with local authorities and other managing parties. |
| 25 | Research activities. | To date targeted work has been land-based e.g. population census. A range of marine based activities are ongoing in relation to water quality, commercial shellfish and benthic communities. | | All research activities to be undertaken by competent individuals, appropriately trained. If not directed at waterfowl, the latter must be considered. Liaise with relevant research bodies |
| | Sand dredging - commercial | Not actively pursued in the NI marine environment but pressures to seek alternative sources to terrestrial/freshwater sites may make this potentially viable. | Potential to impact seabed habitat of importance to seabird prey species. | Liaise with commercial operators, planning and other regulatory authorities. |
| 28 | System dynamics | Cuts across many other issues. Dynamic systems, especially coastal, can be affected by many factors especially engineered structures and significant changes in dominant wind direction or storm frequency. Many systems may indeed still be undergoing responses to historical developments e.g. partial reclamation, seawall construction. Changes may include alteration in sediment grade, shifts in patterns of erosion and deposition etc. Consequences for habitat and species utilisation of the site can be profound. | Main considerations are historical reclamation together with widespread coastal engineering works and ongoing developments. Sediment responses may be expected. Changes in water quality have led to changes e.g. an expansion of mussel beds in Belfast Lough, in turn altering system behaviour. Expanding aquaculture represents an alteration to substrate. | Human induced change should be minimised. Assess planning applications and liaise with other relevant authorities. Ad hoc dumping and removal of natural materials should be managed. Major natural shifts in system behaviour may be identified through analysis of aerial photographs and site monitoring. Major and consistent changes to patterns of habitat distribution and bird utilisation of the site should be noted. |

Table 3. List of site/feature management issues

## 12. MONITORING

Monitoring of our Special Protection Areas takes place at a number of levels, using a variety of methods. Methods for both Site Integrity Monitoring and Condition Assessment can be found in the Monitoring Handbook (To be written).

Maintain the integrity of the site. Undertake Site Integrity Monitoring (SIM) at least annually to ensure compliance with the SPA objectives. The most likely processes of change (e.g. dumping, infilling, gross pollution) will either be picked up by Site Integrity Monitoring, or will be comparatively slow (e.g. change in habitat such as growth of mussel beds). More detailed monitoring of site features should therefore be carried out by Site

Condition Assessment on a less frequent basis (every 6 years initially to pick up long-term or more subtle changes). A baseline survey will be necessary to establish the full extent of the communities present together with the current condition of the features, against which all further condition assessments will be compared.

In addition, detailed quality monitoring or verification monitoring may be carried out from time to time to check whether condition assessment is adequate to detect long-term changes that could affect the site. This type of quality monitoring may involve assessment of aerial photographs to determine site morphological changes. Methodology for this is being developed.

## 12.1 MONITORING SUMMARY

1. Monitor the integrity of the site (Site Integrity Monitoring or SIM) – Complete boundary survey to ensure integrity of site and that any fencing is still intact. Ensure that no sand extraction or dumping has been carried out within the SAC boundary. This SIM should be carried out once a year.

2. Monitor the condition of the site (Condition Assessment) - Monitor the key attributes for each selection feature (dune, saltmarsh, species). This will detect if the features are in favourable condition or not. See Annexes I and II for SAC and Additional ASSI Features respectively.

The favourable condition table provided in Annex 1 is intended to supplement the conservation objectives only in relation to management of established and ongoing activities and future reporting requirements on monitoring condition of the site and its features. It does not by itself provide a comprehensive basis on which to assess plans and projects, but it does provide a basis to inform the scope and nature of any appropriate assessment that may be needed. It should be noted that appropriate assessments are a separate activity to condition monitoring, requiring consideration of issues specific to individual plans or projects.

## 12.2. ADDITIONAL MONITORING ACTIONS UNDERTAKEN FOR SITES IN UNFAVOURABLE CONDITION

Monitoring actions set out in section 6 and Annex 1 will use, amongst other attributes, bird population data to determine site condition. In the event of a significant population decline being detected, a series of subsequent actions will be initiated. The following list is not exhaustive, actions will be site dependant, but the order of these points IS hierarchical i.e. consider point 1, then 2, etc.

1. Assess the site population in a wider geographical context – Northern Ireland, Ireland, UK, world. Refer to BTO ALERT limits etc. Liaise with other competent bodies to meaningfully assess wider pattern. No site action if site decline mirrors regional pattern the cause of which is not related to the site. Action may be required at regional or larger scale. If the cause of the regional population decline (e.g. eutrophication) is found at the site then action may be necessary, but this may need to form part of a network of strategic species action. Further research may be required.
2. Assess the site population in a wider geographical context – Northern Ireland, Ireland, UK, Europe, world. Determine if site losses are balanced by gains elsewhere e.g. breeding terns. Review site condition to determine if losses are due to site deterioration. Determine if possible whether population has relocated within SPA series (national, biogeographical, European). Note that the reasons for such locational changes may not be readily identifiable. Further research may be required.
3. For passage/wintering species assess breeding information. No site action if site decline is due to breeding ground failure, unless breeding ground failure is related to poor adult condition resulting from factors affecting wintering / passage birds.
4. Determine whether a major incident has affected the site e.g. toxic impact on prey items, predation event or geographical shift in available prey. Ability to respond to impacts may be limited.
5. Assess condition of principal site habitats e.g. vegetational composition and structure, change in habitat balance e.g. mudflats reduced by encroaching mussel beds.
6. Assess prey availability. Issues to consider are both within site e.g. water quality, broad site management, and without site e.g. climatically driven factors.
7. Assess whether there have been any changes in any other site features or management practices (see Table 3) that may have affected populations of site selection features.
8. Long-term site value must be considered even when it is found to be in unfavourable condition for a number of reporting cycles. This is particularly important for breeding seabird and wader sites where ongoing appropriate management may ultimately encourage re-establishment of a favourable population.

## 13. SELECTION FEATURE POPULATION TRENDS

Site trends are reported using running 5 year means of annual maximum count (WeBS data). Long term trends in index values have been used to assess changes in overall wintering populations for Northern Ireland and UK (WeBS data). Caution is always necessary in the interpretation and application of waterbird counts given the limitations of these data. The reduced number of both sites and birds in Northern Ireland, result in a greater degree of fluctuation. Trends for Ireland are based on five years of data 1994-1999 (I-WeBS data). Consequently short-term fluctuations apparent in the data series may reflect changes in between year productivity, or other short term phenomena, rather than being indicative of a real change in a population.

Table to be completed

| SPECIES | SITE TREND | NI TREND | ROI TREND | UK TREND | COMMENTS |
|---|---|---|---|---|---|
| Great Crested Grebe | | | | | |
| Red-throated Diver wintering population | | | | | |
| Sandwich Tern breeding season | | | | | |
| Common Tern breeding season | | | | | |
| Arctic Tern breeding season | | | | | |
| Manx Shearwater breeding season | | | | | |
| Eider Duck wintering population | | | | | |

## ANNEX I

### Feature (SPA) – Wintering waterbirds

* = primary attribute. One failure among primary attribute = unfavourable condition
# = Optional factors – these can be in unfavourable condition without the site being in unfavourable condition

| Attribute | Measure | Targets | Comments |
|---|---|---|---|
| *Great Crested Grebe wintering population | Bird numbers | No significant decrease in population against national trends | Five year running averages will be used to monitor population trends through WeBs data. Decline to a level below the Common Standards Monitoring baseline over a five year period may indicate unfavourable condition of the site. |
| *Eider Duck wintering population | Bird numbers | No significant decrease in population against national trends | Five year running averages will be used to monitor population trends through WeBs data. Decline to a level below the Common Standards Monitoring baseline over a five year period may indicate unfavourable condition of the site. |
| *Red-throated Diver wintering population | Bird numbers | No significant decrease in population against national trends | Five year running averages will be used to monitor population trends. WeBS methodologies have been shown to seriously underestimate Diver numbers. Species specific methodology to be employed. Decline to a level below the Common Standards Monitoring baseline over a five year period may indicate unfavourable condition of the site. |

**Feature (SPA) – Breeding Seabirds**

= primary attribute. One failure among primary attribute = unfavourable condition
# = optional factors. These can be in unfavourable condition without the site being in unfavourable condition

| Attribute | Measure | Targets | Comments |
|---|---|---|---|
| * Sandwich Tern breeding population | Apparently occupied nests | No significant decrease in breeding population against national trends | Ideally annual data is collected, then apply 5 year mean criteria. Ideally the population will be maintained above 1% of the national population. Decline to a level below the Common Standards Monitoring baseline over a five year period may indicate unfavourable condition of the site. |
| * Common Tern breeding population | Apparently occupied nests | No significant decrease in breeding population against national trends | Ideally annual data is collected, then apply 5 year mean criteria. Ideally the population will be maintained above 1% of the national population. Decline to a level below the Common Standards Monitoring baseline over a five year period may indicate unfavourable condition of the site. |
| * Arctic Tern breeding population | Apparently occupied nests | No significant decrease in breeding population against national trends | Ideally annual data is collected, then apply 5 year mean criteria. Ideally the population will be maintained above 1% of the national population. Decline to a level below the Common Standards Monitoring baseline over a five year period may indicate unfavourable condition of the site. |
| * Manx Shearwater breeding population | Apparently occupied nests | No significant decrease in breeding population against national trends | Survey delivery likely to be tied to national seabird census programme. Ideally the population will be maintained above 1% of the national population. Decline to a level below the Common Standards Monitoring baseline over a five year period may indicate unfavourable condition of the site. |

Note that breeding seabird populations will be assessed at the 'source colonies' Separate validation surveys may be required to assess utilisation of the marine area for foraging (tern species) and rafting (Manx Shearwater) behaviours. Further assessments e.g. of prey availability, water quality, impacts on seabed may also be necessary if inexplicable declines in breeding populations are recorded.

**Non-avian factors**

| Attribute | Measure | Targets | Comments |
|---|---|---|---|
| * Habitat extent | Area of marine habitats | Maintain the area of marine habitats used or potentially usable by notified species, within the SPA, subject to natural processes. | To be addressed as part of wider marine monitoring programmes especially MSFD actions |