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**The Scottish
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Welsh Government

UK Contribution to Ecologically Coherent MPA Network in the North East Atlantic

Joint Administrations Statement

Defra, DOE, Scottish Government, Welsh Government

What is an ecologically coherent MPA network?

Marine Protected Areas (MPAs) describe a wide range of marine areas which have some level of restriction of activity to protect living, non-living, cultural and/or historic resources. In the UK, MPAs have primarily been set up to help conserve or recover nationally significant or representative examples of marine biodiversity, including threatened or declining species and habitats of European and national importance.

A network of MPAs refers to all the different types of MPAs for biodiversity taken together as a full set of protected sites. When planned and managed as a network, the collection of sites should achieve and deliver benefits more effectively than unrelated individual MPAs can alone.

The UK MPA network will contribute to a wider North East Atlantic MPA network and will include European Marine Sites (SACs and SPAs), the marine components of Ramsar sites and SSSIs, MCZs (English and Welsh waters), Nature Conservation MPAs (Scottish inshore waters and the Scottish offshore region), and future MCZs in Northern Ireland territorial waters.

Why do we need an ecologically coherent MPA network?

Linking MPAs together into an ecologically coherent network, supported by wider environmental management measures will achieve benefits more effectively than individual MPAs can alone. A well designed network will contain MPAs of different sizes for different habitats and species, connected through movements of adult species and larvae, with a range of protection levels, to protect biodiversity. A coherent network can therefore function to protect multiple habitats and species, and support a variety of key habitats and life stages of species. Greater protection of species and habitats in MPAs

could have beneficial effects on ecosystems that rely on these species and habitats, thus possibly increasing the surrounding potential biodiversity.

The UK has committed to a number of international agreements on MPAs including an ecologically coherent network of MPAs in the North East Atlantic. The UK network will act as a contribution to this wider network, in partnership with neighbouring countries, based on OSPAR Convention, World Summit on Sustainable Development and Convention on Biological Diversity. There are also links to European Directives such as the Marine Strategy Framework Directive and EC Birds and Habitats Directives which make reference to establishing coherent networks. Our domestic duties under the Marine and Coastal Access Act 2009, the Marine (Scotland) Act and the Northern Ireland Marine Bill specify that the network should: contribute to conservation or improvement of the marine environment in the UK marine area; represent the range of features present in the UK marine area; and that the conservation of a feature may require the designation of more than one site.

Together our existing MPAs contribute a great deal to the MPA Network. The work being undertaken to designate further European Marine Sites, MCZs and Nature Conservation MPAs will build on this to meet our international and national commitments.

What does an ecologically coherent MPA network mean for the UK?

We are aiming for a UK contribution to an ecologically coherent MPA network in the North East Atlantic, in accordance with the OSPAR Convention which is an evolving scientific concept. The OSPAR Commission guidance¹ outlines five main elements to assist in interpreting the concept of an ecologically coherent MPA network. The principles which underpin an ecologically coherent network are widely accepted and supported by the scientific community and by the administrations.

The five main OSPAR principles guiding the process are:

Features: Sites should represent the range of species, habitats and ecological processes in the area. The proportion of features included in the MPA network should be determined on a feature-by-feature basis, considering whether features that are in decline, at risk or particularly sensitive are of a higher priority and would benefit from a higher proportion being protected by MPAs.

Representivity: To support the sustainable use, protection and conservation of marine biological diversity and ecosystems, areas which best represent the range of species, habitats and ecological processes.

¹ OSPAR 2006, Guidance on developing an ecologically coherent network of OSPAR marine protected areas (Reference number 2006-3)

Connectivity: This may be approximated by ensuring the MPA network is well distributed in space and takes into account the linkages between marine ecosystems.

Resilience: Adequate replication of habitats, species and ecological processes in separate MPAs in each biogeographic area is desirable where possible. The size of the site should be sufficient to maintain the integrity of the feature for which it is being selected.

Management: MPAs should be managed to ensure the protection of the features for which they were selected and to support the functioning of an ecologically coherent network.

A network of MPAs can be considered to be ecologically coherent if it satisfies the network design principles agreed by OSPAR. These principles have been applied during the identification of MCZs/marine protected areas. The OSPAR Commission guidance has been used by England², Scotland³ and Wales⁴ to develop network design principles and national guidance to select sites as MCZs/marine protected areas. In Northern Ireland MCZ guidance is currently being drafted and also uses the key design principles of the OSPAR convention.

How will this be achieved?

We need to consider the most appropriate method to assess the completion of the network and our contribution to it. This will need to link to both our network commitments under the Marine and Coastal Access Act, Marine (Scotland) Act and Northern Ireland Bill and the wider OSPAR network. We consider that there is a strong scientific case for an assessment of a marine protected area network to be based on biogeographic regions⁵, rather than administrative regions, in line with OSPAR guidance. The UK is contributing to the development of methodologies through OSPAR, and we are actively working across the UK administrations to agree on an approach which links all marine protected area programmes in the UK. As the network continues to develop, effective management will also remain a key factor in assessing an ecologically coherent marine protected area network, and in meeting our international commitments under OSPAR.

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² Defra (2010). Guidance Note on selection and designation of Marine Conservation Zones (Note 1) and Natural England and the Joint Nature Conservation Committee (2010). The Marine Conservation Zone Project: Ecological Network Guidance. Sheffield and Peterborough, UK;

³ Scottish Government (2011) Marine Protected Areas in Scotland's Seas, Guidelines on the selection of MPAs and development of the MPA network.

⁴ Welsh Government (2011), Marine Conservation Zone Project – Wales. Site Selection Guidance for Highly Protected Marine Conservation Zones.

⁵ Geographic areas of biological communities that have similar or shared characteristics