Supplementary Advice on Conservation Objectives for West Shetland Shelf Nature Conservation MPA UKNCMPA030

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JNCC

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The information provided in this document sets out JNCC's supplementary advice on the conservation objectives set for West Shetland Shelf Nature Conservation MPA (NCMPA), hereafter referred to as 'the site'. This document forms part of JNCC's formal conservation advice package for the site and must be read in conjunction with all parts of the package as listed below:

- **Background Document** explaining where to find the advice package, JNCC's role in the provision of conservation advice, how the advice has been prepared, when to refer to it and how it can be applied;
- **Conservation Objectives and Management Advice** document setting out the broad ecological aims for the site and JNCC's advice on;
    - protected feature condition;
    - conservation benefits that the site can provide if managed effectively; and
    - conservation measures that JNCC consider are required to support achievement of the conservation objectives stated for the site.
- **Advice on Operations** providing information on those human activities that, if taking place within or near the site, can impact it and hinder the achievement of the conservation objectives stated for the site.

The most up-to-date conservation advice package for the site can be downloaded from the conservation advice section of the Site Information Centre (SIC) on JNCC's website.

The advice presented here describes the ecological characteristics or 'attributes' of the site's protected feature: **offshore subtidal sands and gravels**, specified in the site's conservation objectives listed in the site's Designation Order. These attributes include extent and distribution, structure and function and supporting processes.

Figure 1 below illustrates the concept of how a protected feature's attributes are interlinked: with impacts on one potentially having knock-on effects on another e.g. the impairment of any of the supporting processes on which a feature relies can result in changes to its extent and distribution and structure and function.

Collectively, the attributes set out in Table 1 below, along with the objectives set for each of them, describe the desired ecological condition (favourable) for the site's protected features. All attributes listed in Table 1 must be taken into consideration when assessing impacts from an activity.

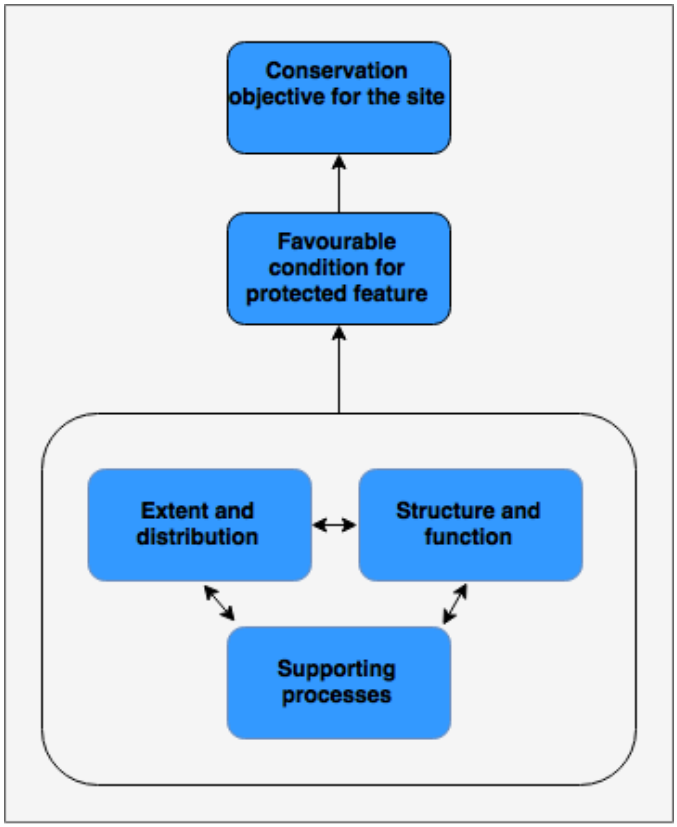

Figure 1. Conceptual diagram showing how feature attributes are interlinked and collectively describe favourable condition and contribute to the conservation objectives stated for the site.

In **Table 1** below, the attributes for the offshore subtidal sands and gravels protected features are listed respectively. An objective of recover or conserve is set for each protected feature attribute, reflecting our current understanding of available evidence e.g. whether it indicates some of a protected feature's extent is lost and needs to be recovered or that extent is not lost and needs to be conserved to ensure the protected feature is in overall favourable condition. Where a recover objective is advised and there is considerable uncertainty as to whether recovery is possible, this will be noted alongside the objective.

The rationale for setting an objective is provided in the summary of evidence column and supporting references listed in the reference section at the end of this document.

Note: also that when a conserve objective is set, this does not preclude the need for management, now or in the future to ensure a protected feature remains in favourable condition.

Table 1: Supplementary Advice on Conservation Objectives for offshore subtidal sands and gravels protected feature of the site

In summary, the offshore subtidal sands and gravels protected feature is considered to be in unfavourable condition. Whilst fisheries management measures were introduced in October 2025, JNCC do not consider that sufficient time has elapsed for the protected feature of the site to recover at the time of writing. Please see the Conservation Objectives and Management Advice document available in the conservation advice section of the SIC for JNCC's advice on the management of activities which JNCC consider is needed to recover the offshore subtidal sands and gravels protected feature of the site. Further information on activities capable of affecting the protected feature of the site can be found in the Advice on Operations workbook available also in the conservation advice section of the SIC.

Attribute	Summary of evidence	View of attribute condition & objective	Confidence in attribute condition
Extent and distribution	Extent and distribution of offshore subtidal sands and gravels is defined by sediment composition and biological assemblages. Any changes to the sediment composition and biological assemblages brought about by human activities may impact the conservation status of the feature. The offshore subtidal sands and gravels within the West Shetland Shelf MPA extend over the entire site and is comprised of a wide variety of sand and gravel habitats (NatureScot, 2025). The offshore subtidal sands and gravels range from fine-grained sands to coarse gravels that provide conditions suitable for a diverse range of animals to thrive in and on the seabed. Vessel Monitoring System (VMS) data from 2019 to 2020 indicates demersal trawling takes place at moderate levels over the middle of the site and at lower levels to the west and east. This is an increase in demersal trawling from 2019, due to the lifting of the windsock fisheries closure. The closure prohibited bottom contacting gear across the whole of the site to protect cod stocks. In 2019, the windsock area was reopened for fishing, with a voluntary	Unfavourable - needs to be recovered	Low – JNCC has a baseline understanding of the extent and distribution of the offshore subtidal sands and gravels feature within the site, which is derived from data used to create the GEMs habitat layer published in 2024 (NatureScot, 2025). The GEMs habitat layer is a composite data layer that contains data from multiple sources. The type of data used within the layer includes particle size analysis/distribution from grab samples, video and still images and multibeam backscatter data. Evidence for impact to the site is indirect, based on our understanding of the sensitivity of offshore subtidal sands and gravels, and associated biological communities, to pressures associated with human activities known to have taken place in the site; in this case

	arrangement replacing it. The voluntary arrangement allowed fishing to occur across the site but restricted static gears to the west and middle of the site and demersal trawls to the middle and east of the site. There is currently no processed VMS evidence for 2021-2025, but it is assumed that similar levels of fishing have been occurring over this time. The level of recent demersal fishing, causing the pressures of abrasion, penetration and removal of non-target species, have the ability to affect the extent and distribution of offshore subtidal sand and grave habitat. Management was introduced in October 2025, prohibiting beam trawling and dredging from the entire site and demersal trawling from two different zoned areas of the site (Marine Directorate, 2025). JNCC concludes that the extent and distribution of offshore subtidal sands and gravels may have been impacted by demersal trawling use within the site. Whilst management has now been introduced, JNCC do not believe that the offshore subtidal sands and gravels protected feature will have had sufficient time to recover. Therefore, JNCC advises a recover objective on this basis.		bottom-contacting fishing gear (Tyler-Walters *et al.,* 2023 and JNCC, 2018). Our information about activities within the site is incomplete e.g. our best available evidence for fishing activities goes up to the year 2020 and it also cannot support an assessment of potential impacts from static fishing gear use. The assessment is also limited by the lack of information regarding maintenance activities associated with cabling within the site and Ministry of Defence activities that could be occurring, as the site overlaps with a Military Practice Area.
Structure and function	Structure and function of offshore subtidal sands and gravels feature pertains to the physical structure of the habitat type itself (finer scale topography and sediment composition) and its biological structure (the presence of key and influential species and characteristic communities). JNCC does not consider that there is enough evidence to assess the conservation status of the key and influential	Unfavourable - needs to be recovered	Low – based on the same confidence justification as extent and distribution.

	species associated with offshore subtidal sands and gravels protected feature of the site. However, based on the same evidence presented under extent and distribution, JNCC conclude that the structure and function of the offshore subtidal sands and gravels may have also been impacted. Whilst management of mobile bottom-contacting fishing gear has now been introduced, JNCC do not believe the offshore subtidal sands and gravels will have had the time to recover. Therefore, JNCC advises a recover objective on this basis.		
Supporting processes	Supporting processes with respect to offshore subtidal sands and gravels include hydrodynamic regime, water and sediment quality. There is no evidence to suggest that human activities are having an adverse impact on the typical hydrodynamic regime to which the site is exposed. Whilst it is noted that the Celtic Seas and Greater North Sea OSPAR regions within which the site is located has been assessed to have a poor contaminant status (Larson *et al.,* 2022), this is insufficient evidence to assess water or sediment quality in the site itself. Overall, there is no evidence to suggest that supporting processes that operate at this site are being impeded with respect to supporting the presence of offshore subtidal sands and gravels. JNCC advises a conserve objective on this basis.	Favourable – needs to be conserved	Low – The evidence-base supporting JNCC's assessment against this attribute draws upon data from the wider Celtic Sea and Greater North Sea OSPAR Regions (Larsen *et al.,* 2022), rather than any evidence available from within, or in close proximity to, the site itself. This lack of data pertaining to water and sediment quality within the site limits this assessment. Moreover, there is a lack of time series data information about water quality and on how human activities may have impacted this.

References

JNCC (2018) Marine Activities and Pressures Evidence. Available at https://jncc.gov.uk/our-work/marine-activities-and-pressures-evidence/

Larsen, M.M., Fryer, R., Hjermann, D., McHugh, B. and Sorensen, A. 2022. *Status and Trend hazardous substances using CHASE*. In: OSPAR, 2023: The 2023 Quality Status Report for the North-East Atlantic. OSPAR Commission, London. Available at: https://oap.ospar.org/en/ospar-assessments/quality-status-reports/qsr-2023/other-assessments/chase

Marine Directorate, The Offshore Fishing (Prohibition of Fishing Methods) (Scotland) Order 2025 (the 2025 Order). Guidance available through "Fisheries Management Measures within Scottish Offshore Marine Protected Areas Coordinates and Restrictions", 2025. ISBN: 9781806430871

NatureScot (2025) Geodatabase of Marine features adjacent to Scotland (GeMS). Available at: https://opendata.nature.scot/maps/0e722e3e911e424f8dacac5a587c0dfb/about

Tyler-Walters, H., Tillin, H.M., d'Avack, E.A.S., Perry, F., Stamp, T., (2023). Marine Evidence-based Sensitivity Assessment (MarESA) – Guidance Manual. *Marine Life Information Network (MarLIN).* Marine Biological Association of the UK, Plymouth, pp. 170. Available from https://www.marlin.ac.uk/publications.

VMS MMO internal underlying dataset variant of Fishing Activity for over 15 metre vessels which covers 2007 – 2020.