Supplementary Advice on Conservation Objectives for Bassurelle Sandbank Special Area of Conservation UK0030368

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The information provided in this document sets out JNCC's supplementary advice on the conservation objectives set for Bassurelle Sandbank Special Area of Conservation (SAC), 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;
    - qualifying 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 adversely affect the site's integrity, presenting a risk of not achieving 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 qualifying Annex I feature: **Sandbanks which are slightly covered by seawater all the time**, specified in the site's conservation objectives. These attributes include extent and distribution, structure and function and supporting processes.

Figure 1 below illustrates the concept of how a qualifying 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 qualifying feature. The condition of the feature contributes to its favourable conservation status more widely, as

well as the site's integrity. All attributes listed in Table 1 must be taken into consideration when assessing impacts from an activity.

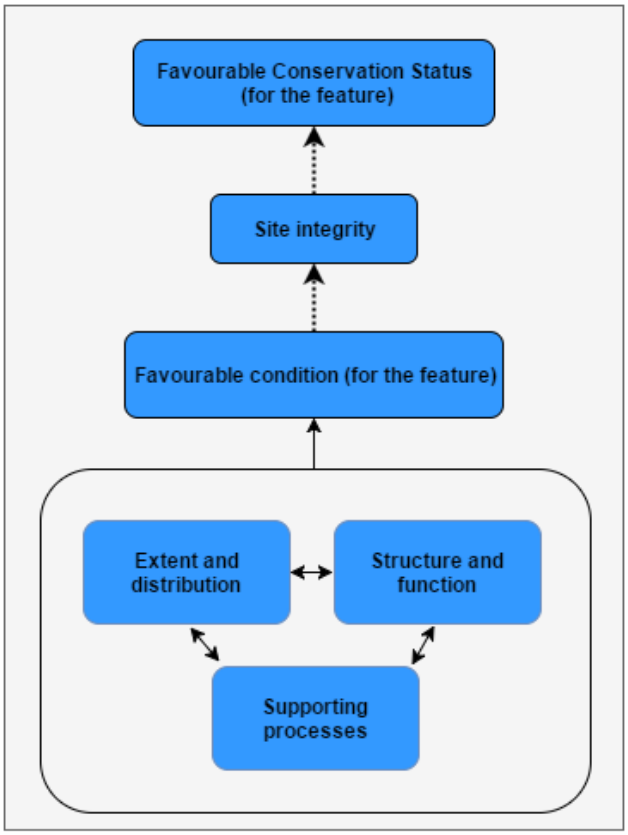

Figure 1. Conceptual diagram showing how qualifying feature attributes are interlinked, describing favourable condition and contribute to site integrity and more widely a qualifying feature's favourable conservation status.

In Table 1 below, the attributes for the Sandbanks which are slightly covered by seawater all the time qualifying feature are listed. An objective of restore or maintain is set for each qualifying feature attribute, reflecting our current understanding of available evidence e.g. whether it indicates some of a qualifying feature's extent is lost and needs to be restored or that extent is not lost and needs to be maintained to ensure the qualifying feature is in overall favourable condition. Where a restore objective is advised and there is considerable uncertainty as to whether restoration 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: when a maintain objective is set, this does not preclude the need for management, now or in the future to ensure the qualifying feature remains in favourable condition.

Table 1: Supplementary Advice on Conservation Objectives for Sandbanks which are slightly covered by seawater all the time qualifying feature of the site

In summary, the Sandbanks which are slightly covered by seawater all the time qualifying feature within the site is considered to be in unfavourable condition. Active management of human activities is required to restore the biological structure and function attribute of the qualifying feature within the site. 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 restore the Sandbanks which are slightly covered by seawater all the time qualifying feature of the site. Further information on activities capable of affecting the qualifying 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	The site map for Bassurelle Sandbank SAC is available on JNCC's Interactive MPA Mapper and shows the extent and distribution of the qualifying feature within the site. The extent and distribution of Annex I Sandbank feature is determined by large scale topography, sediment composition and biological assemblages. Any changes to these brought about by human activity may impact the conservation status of this Annex I Sandbank feature. To the best of our knowledge, there are no human activities known to be occurring which could impact the extent and distribution of the qualifying feature of the site and JNCC therefore advise a maintain objective.	Favourable – needs to be maintained	Moderate – JNCC's understanding of the extent and distribution of the qualifying feature of Bassurelle Sandbank SAC is based on Multibeam Echosounder (MBES) bathymetry and backscatter data collected in 2013 and 2014 (Barrio-Froján *et al.,* 2017; Clare *et al.* 2020). Evidence for impact is indirect, based on our understanding of the sensitivity of the qualifying feature of the site to pressures associated with human activities known to have taken place within the site; in this case bottom-

			contacting fishing gear (Tyler-Walters *et al*., 2023 and JNCC 2018). To the best of our knowledge, pressures from fishing activities are not capable of impacting the extent and distribution of the feature.
Structure and function	The structure and function of Annex I Sandbanks which are slightly covered by seawater all the time pertains to their physical structure (finer scale topography and sediment composition) and biological structure (the presence of key and influential species and characteristic communities) and functions. JNCC does not consider that there is enough evidence to assess the conservation status of the key and influential species associated with Annex I Sandbanks which are slightly covered by seawater. According to Vessel Monitoring Service (VMS) data (2009-2021), high levels of fishing effort with mobile demersal gears (including demersal and beam trawls, demersal seines, and low levels of shellfish dredging (predominantly in the west of the site)) has been recorded across the site. These activities exert pressures such as abrasion, penetration and the removal of non-target species, which can affect the characteristic biological communities and their associated functions. However, they are not considered capable of impacting the large-scale topographic structures of the site, such as sand waves and mega ripples.	Unfavourable - needs to be restored	Moderate - JNCC have a baseline understanding of the structure and function of the qualifying feature of the site. Evidence underpinning the characteristic biological communities and their associated functions within the site is based on data from dedicated surveys that took place in 2013 and 2017 (Barrio-Froján *et al.,* 2017; Clare *et al.* 2020) and the MESO tool. Evidence for impact is indirect, based on our understanding of the sensitivity of the qualifying feature of the site and its associated biological communities to pressures associated with human activities known to have taken place within the site; in this case bottom-contacting fishing gear (Tyler-Walters *et al*., 2023 and JNCC 2018). However, confidence has been upgraded to moderate due to moderate due to direct

	The biological communities associated with subtidal coarse, subtidal sand and subtidal mixed sediments of the sandbank, however, are reported to be sensitive to pressures associated with mobile bottom-contact gears. The MESO tool indicates a probable negative impact on several ecosystem service functions (such as reduction in nutrient cycling, waste remediation and seafood) provided by the sand, coarse and mixed sediment habitats that comprise sandbanks. These impacts are linked to surface and subsurface abrasion pressures from mobile bottom-contact fishing gears, which operate within the site. The qualifying feature of the site has the potential to deliver a range of ecosystem services. See the COMA document for more detail on the services relevant to this feature. Where structure and function are impaired, it is reasonable to expect a reduction in the feature's capacity to deliver these services, although the size of that change is not always well evidenced. The pressures 'abrasion/disturbance of the substrate on the surface of the seabed' and 'penetration and/or disturbance of the substrate below the surface of the seabed, including abrasion' associated with mobile demersal fishing gears (demersal trawling, beam trawling, demersal seines and shellfish dredging) are expected to influence the feature's biological structure and function. MESO indicates that these pressures may also affect the		evidence from sidescan sonar showing the penetration of trawl marks in the sediments (Barrio-Froján *et al.,* 2017). Our information about activities within the site is incomplete e.g. our best available evidence for fishing activities only goes up to 2020 and it also cannot support an assessment of impacts from static gear fishing. The assessment is also limited by our lack of understanding of the key and influential species associated with the qualifying feature.

	delivery of the following ecosystem services: nutrient cycling, seafood, waste remediation, waste breakdown, nursery habitat, seafood (animal), biomass, carbon storage (Tillin *et al.* 2019). JNCC conclude that mobile, bottom-contacting fishing activities taking place may have impacted upon the biological structure, and by association function, of the qualifying feature of the site. As such, JNCC conclude unfavourable condition for this attribute.		
Supporting processes	Supporting processes with respect to the qualifying feature of the site include hydrodynamic regime, water quality and sediment quality. There is no evidence to suggest that human activities within, or in close proximity to, the site are having an adverse impact on the typical hydrodynamic regime to which the site is exposed. Whilst it is noted that the Eastern Channel OSPAR region within which the site is located has been assessed to have a poor contaminant status (Larson *et al.,* 2022), there is insufficient evidence to assess water and sediment quality in the site. Overall, there is no evidence to suggest that supporting processes that operate at this site are being impeded with respect to supporting the conservation status of the qualifying feature of the site. JNCC therefore advise a maintain objective on this basis.	Favourable – needs to be maintained	Low - The evidence-base supporting JNCC's assessment against this attribute draws upon data from the wider Eastern Channel Region (Larson *et al.,* 2022), rather than any evidence available from within, or in close proximity to, the site itself. Moreover, there is a lack of time series data about water and sediment quality and on how human activities may have impacted these.

References

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