

East Coast (Northern Ireland) Marine

Proposed Special Protection Area

**Information supporting the proposal together with
Frequently Asked Questions relating to
Special Protection Areas**

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An Agency within the Department of the
Environment
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Northern Ireland
Environment
Agency

East Coast (Northern Ireland) Marine proposed Special Protection Area

Area name:	East Coast (Northern Ireland)
Administrative areas:	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
Component ASSI:	None

1. Introduction

This document is part of a suite of materials which explain the rationale for the proposed designation of the East Coast (Northern Ireland) Special Protection Area (SPA). This document sets out the drivers behind the designation of Special Protection Areas, how the designation process works, the reasons behind the selection of this site as a Special Protection Area and the implications for people and organisations with an interest in this area. It will introduce some of the key concepts and terminology and includes a Frequently Asked Questions section to try to expand on some of the typical questions that may arise.

2. Background to the proposed East Coast (Northern Ireland) Special Protection Area

This proposal is to designate an area called East Coast (Northern Ireland) as a Special Protection Area (SPA). This area will subsume an existing Special Protection Area of Belfast Lough Open Water (Site Code UK9020290), and also include marine waters of the Irish Sea along the east coast of Northern Ireland.

The site boundary will include coastal and near shore waters from Ringfad in the north near Carnlough, County Antrim, the marine area of Larne Lough, the marine area of Belfast Lough, waters around the Copeland Islands, and waters offshore of the Ards Peninsula to Cloghan Head, near Ardglass, County Down in the south. It will include a diverse range of seabed habitats, from extensive coastal fringing reefs of various types to finer silt in Belfast Lough.

The site boundary adjoins five sites already designated as SPAs along the east coast of Northern Ireland. These sites are Larne Lough SPA (Site Code UK9020042), Belfast Lough SPA (Site Code UK9020101), Outer Ards SPA (Site Code UK9020271), Copeland Islands SPA (Site Code UK9020291), and Strangford Lough SPA (Site Code UK9020111). These SPAs have been designated as they provide habitat for significant populations of regularly occurring bird species as recognised in European legislation.

The proposed East Coast (Northern Ireland) Marine SPA recognises the contribution made by this wider coastal and marine area to meet the foraging requirements of breeding Terns in adjoining colonies, in the areas already designated as SPAs, for Manx Shearwater, which breed on the Copeland Islands, but use a much larger marine area around the islands for their 'rafting' requirements, and for a significant non-breeding population of Red-throated Diver on Belfast Lough together with non-breeding populations of Great Crested Grebe and Eider Duck.

The SPAs already designated which adjoin the East Coast (Northern Ireland) Marine SPA are mainly terrestrial habitats. This new SPA will include nearshore and coastal waters, as well as subsuming the marine area currently in the Belfast Lough Open Water SPA.

3. Drivers behind the designation of Special Protection Areas

3a. Special Protection Areas

A Special Protection Area is an area of land or sea which has been designated by a European Union (EU) Member State to ensure the strict protection of a site for the conservation of wild birds. The EU Directive on the Conservation of Wild Birds (hereafter referred to as the Birds Directive) (European Commission, 2015) requires Member States to designate areas as Special Protection Areas.

The Birds Directive 2009/147/EC (codified version of Directive 79/409/EEC) in conjunction with the EU Habitats Directive 92/43/EEC provide the framework for the conservation of nature and wild birds within Europe. These legislative measures provide for a network of protected sites across Europe called Natura 2000 sites. The Natura 2000 network comprises sites designated as SPAs, and Special Areas of Conservation (SACs). The main objective for all Natura 2000 sites is the maintenance (or restoration) to ‘favourable conservation status’ of its habitats and species.

Article 4 of the Birds Directive requires Member States to designate (or classify) the most suitable territories in number and size as Special Protection Areas for the conservation of certain wild bird species. These are the areas of the most important habitats or territories of certain rare, vulnerable, and migratory bird species. More specifically, Article 4 of the Directive requires Member states to classify sites as SPAs;

- *for rare or vulnerable bird species (as listed in Annex I) (Article 4.1); and also*
- *for regularly occurring migratory species (Article 4.2).*

Member States are also asked (in Article 4.2) to pay particular attention to the protection of wetlands and particularly to wetlands of international importance.

The Northern Ireland Environment Agency (NIEA), an agency of the Department of the Environment (DOE) is responsible for the selection, designation and assessment of Special Protection Areas in Northern Ireland. ‘The Conservation (Natural Habitats, etc) Regulations (Northern Ireland) 1995’ (as amended) provides for the designation, protection and management of European Sites (SPAs and SACs), the protection of ‘European Protected Species’, and the adaption of planning and other controls for the protection of the European Sites.

Sites are selected which hold important populations of certain rare, vulnerable, and migratory bird species. The criteria used to select sites is done to identify the most suitable territories in number and size. The decision to then designate a site as a SPA is made only on the basis of sound scientific evidence.

The Joint Nature Conservation Committee (JNCC), working in conjunction with the Statutory Nature Conservation Bodies (for England, Scotland, Wales and Northern Ireland) and the Devolved Administrations, produced guidelines for use in selecting SPAs in the UK (JNCC,

2013). Further information on this guidance can be accessed on the JNCC website (JNCC, 2010).

The relevant data supporting the SPA proposals, together with wider population data to provide a context in which to assess site significance, are collated by JNCC from a number of sources. Other site survey data, scientific publications and reports are also used to compile a full understanding of the site.

NIEA identify sites as candidate SPAs according to the selection guidelines noted above. As part of the SPA classification process, a number of formal documents are prepared. These are a citation document, a Natura 2000 Standard Data Form, derived from the citation document and in the standard format in which data is sent to the European Commission (JNCC, 2013). The area to be classified is identified on an accompanying map.

3b. Review of the UK SPA network

The UK Government asked the JNCC and UK conservation agencies to review the SPA network across the UK. This process resulted in the publication of the ‘SPA Review’ in 2001. This review gave a greater understanding of the UK’s SPA network in terms of number of sites selected, and the species that qualified within these sites. The SPA Review noted that a review of the UK’s SPA network in the marine environment was required (JNCC, 2013).

Most of the sites originally designated as SPAs in Northern Ireland and indeed all of the UK, were wholly terrestrial sites. The Birds Directive requires that sites be classified for the conservation of bird species in the ‘geographical sea and land area’ where the Directive applies. It is now recognised by all of the UK conservation agencies that work is required to help create a UK SPA marine network to give protection to the wider ecological needs of the breeding and wintering seabirds, and wintering waterbirds who use the marine environment.

3c. Marine SPAs

The JNCC has led on work in the UK to highlight areas used by marine birds as suitable for selection as marine SPAs. For many years the JNCC together with the UK nature conservation agencies have undertaken extensive survey work and collected data on marine birds in UK waters. Data analysis performed on this information has helped to identify the most important aggregations suitable for consideration as part of a network of marine SPAs.

In order to facilitate analysis across the many different ecologies of 44 different bird species (rare or vulnerable (Annex I of the Birds Directive) or regularly occurring migratory birds) for which the JNCC have undertaken surveys and analysis, 7 main strands of survey and analysis were used to capture the most important seasons for these species (JNCC, 2015a). To find out more about the methods, and reports please visit the JNCC website (JNCC, 2015a).

The Department of the Environment, including the NIEA, has been fully engaged with this process to ascertain suitable areas for selection as marine SPAs.

It is then the responsibility of the UK statutory nature conservation bodies (for inshore waters up to 12 nautical miles from the coast), or the JNCC (for offshore waters from 12-200 nautical miles) to select areas for possible classification as marine SPAs. Areas that are found suitable for classification are subject to a public consultation (JNCC, 2015b).

4. Description of the East Coast (Northern Ireland) Marine Special Protection Area

The proposed East Coast (Northern Ireland) Marine Special Protection Area includes a range of habitats along the east coast of Northern Ireland, including nearshore and coastal waters.

The proposed SPA begins in the north at Ringfad, near Carnlough, includes the marine areas of Larne Lough and Belfast Lough, waters around the Copeland Islands, and further south along the east coast of the Ards Peninsula, beyond where Strangford Lough meets the Irish Sea, and ending in the southern extent of the SPA site boundary at Cloghan Head, near Ardglass.

Several sites along this east coast area of Northern Ireland are highly significant for the numbers of bird species which they hold. In a north-south direction along the east coast, these include Larne Lough, Belfast Lough, Outer Ards, Copeland Islands, and Strangford Lough. The significance of the importance of these sites is recognised in their designation as SPAs. These SPAs adjoin the site boundary of the proposed East Coast (Northern Ireland) Marine SPA, while the existing Belfast Lough Open Water SPA will be subsumed in the East Coast (Northern Ireland) Marine SPA.

In addition, Larne Lough, Belfast Lough, and Strangford Lough have also been designated as ‘Ramsar Sites’. This means that these sites are included on the Ramsar Convention list of ‘wetlands of international importance’ (Ramsar, 2014).

Larne Lough in the northern section of the proposed SPA, is a large, sheltered sea lough, and provides habitat for large numbers of waterbirds in winter, and hosts nesting Terns and gulls in summer. The Lough is sheltered by the arm of Island Magee, and at its mouth is the busy Larne Port. While the inter-tidal mudflats of the Lough are included in the Larne Lough SPA, the proposed SPA will include the marine waters of Larne Lough which support foraging Terns.

Belfast Lough is a large and broad inter-tidal sea lough, situated at the mouth of the River Lagan, with Northern Ireland’s largest and most industrialised city, Belfast at its head. Belfast Port is also located here and is one of the main shipping hubs for trade cargo in Northern Ireland (AFBI, 2015). The Lough provides a range of habitats such as inter-tidal mudflats and rocky shoreline which are suitable for large numbers of waders, ducks, grebes, and gulls as well as breeding Terns. Terns regularly forage in the marine area while Manx Shearwater utilise waters at the mouth of the Lough. Outside the breeding season, these waters are of particular importance for Red-throated Diver, Great Crested Grebe and Eider Duck populations. The southern shore of the Lough has been altered by land reclamation over the years.

East of Belfast Lough, the coastline from Hollywood to Helen’s Bay hosts many wintering duck and waders. Along Bangor and Groomsport the coastline is varied, with many coastal and wetland birds in the area throughout the year and nesting Terns in summer which use the adjoining marine area for foraging.

The Copeland Islands provide suitable habitat for seabirds in summer, including significant numbers of breeding Terns and Manx Shearwater. In addition, the waters around the Copeland Islands provide important habitat for the rafting behaviour of Manx Shearwater as well as foraging Tern.

The east coast of the Ards Peninsula from Donaghadee to its southern tip near Portaferry comprises of a mixture of low-lying rocky shore, sandy bays and rocky offshore islets, which

provide good habitat for wintering birds. There are several fishing ports along the Ards Peninsula, including Portavogie, one of the main fishing ports in Northern Ireland (AFBI, 2015). Again the adjoining marine area is important for Manx Shearwater and foraging Tern.

The third of the Ramsar sites listed earlier, and one of two major wetland sites in County Down (along with Belfast Lough), is Strangford Lough SPA. Strangford Lough is a vast inlet of mudflats, sand, saltmarsh, rocky islands and shoreline, which is enclosed by the arm of the Ards Peninsula. This Lough attracts thousands of wildfowl and waders in winter, and nesting Terns in summer (Dempsey and O'Clery, 2007). The waters in and adjoining Strangford Lough SPA are used by foraging Terns.

To the southern extent of the proposed East Coast (Northern Ireland) Marine SPA the site boundary adjoins the southern boundary of the Strangford Lough SPA where it meets the Irish Sea between Ballyquatin Point and Killard Point.

5. Proposed East Coast (Northern Ireland) Marine Special Protection Area

The current proposal consists of including in a marine SPA, nearshore and coastal waters along the east coast of Northern Ireland, most of which adjoins existing east coast SPAs, and also subsuming the Belfast Lough Open Water SPA. See Figure 1 for the site boundary of the proposed SPA. The proposed East Coast (Northern Ireland) SPA will cover an area of 96,668.34 hectares.

The information to support the designation of this site has come from studies undertaken by the JNCC. The area of the proposed SPA includes areas foraged by Terns from five different colonies along the east coast of Northern Ireland, areas used by Manx Shearwater for their 'rafting behaviour' on water, who breed on the Copeland Islands, and areas used by wintering Red-throated Diver, Great Crested Grebe and Eider Duck. The five Tern colonies along the east coast are at Larne Lough, Belfast Lough, Outer Ards, Copeland Islands, and Strangford Lough, which are also designated SPAs.

The site boundary has been identified from the analysis, including modelling, and reports undertaken by the JNCC. This included analysis of the foraging areas used by the Terns from breeding colonies along the east coast, using a 'Tern-chasing' method, the spatial extent of areas used by breeding Manx Shearwater for their rafting behaviour from the Copeland Islands colony, and from aerial surveys of the numbers of wintering Red-throated Divers using Belfast Lough. Further information on the survey and statistical methods employed to define the marine areas can be found on JNCC website (2015a). Separate surveys have provided the information for Great Crested Grebe and Eider Duck.

6. Reasons for proposed East Coast (Northern Ireland) Marine Special Protection Area

This notice concerns the proposal to designate an area defined as 'East Coast (Northern Ireland)' as a marine SPA. The purpose of the designation of the East Coast (Northern Ireland) Marine SPA is to ensure that the waters and seafloor habitats of this marine area are managed to meet all the needs of these species while they are in the area, and once they migrate elsewhere, that the habitats are maintained all year-round.

The proposed SPA meets the criteria for selection as a SPA as the area included in the site boundary is regularly used by several species listed in Annex I of the Birds Directive at levels

of 1% or more of their all-Ireland populations, and this area is also regularly used by several migratory species at levels of 1% or more of their wider biogeographical populations.

The species occurring in the proposed East Coast (Northern Ireland) Marine SPA which are listed in Annex I are important populations of three different species of breeding Tern (Sandwich Tern, Common Tern, and Arctic Tern), and Red-throated Diver. The regularly occurring migratory species in the proposed SPA are important non-breeding populations of Great Crested Grebe and Eider Duck and of breeding Manx Shearwater.

This SPA will ensure that the marine areas of this section of the east coast of Northern Ireland will be afforded the same protection under designation as a SPA, just as the existing Belfast Lough Open Water SPA, and the five adjoining east coast SPAs are currently protected under designation as SPAs. This will safeguard the habitats and ecological needs of the breeding Terns that nest in the five colonies along the east coast, and forage in the Irish Sea, the Manx Shearwater that nest on the Copeland Islands, and undertake rafting behaviour in the surrounding waters, and also the areas used by wintering Red-throated Diver, Great Crested Grebe and Eider Duck.

The habitats and ecological needs of the featured species will be safeguarded under designation in the SPA, in addition to the other bird species which are not part of the SPA qualifying features but which use the area.

7. Conservation Objectives

A conservation objective is a statement of the desired ecological quality of a feature (habitat, species or geological) for which a SPA is designated. The conservation objective establishes whether the feature condition meets the desired state and should be maintained, or falls below the desired state and should be recovered to favourable condition.

East Coast (Northern Ireland) Marine SPA seeks to contribute to the protection of the selection features noted below.

The overall conservation objective for the East Coast (Northern Ireland) SPA will be: (for complete information, the site conservation objectives should be read)

to maintain the associated feature populations in favourable condition (to achieve stable or increasing populations with reference made to these populations at time of designation) together with the habitats on which they depend.

Further information on activities which may adversely impact (or positively benefit) the proposed SPA, can be found in the accompanying Regulatory Impact Assessment for Marine Special Protection Areas in the Northern Ireland inshore region.

8. Further information supporting East Coast (Northern Ireland) SPA

The following tables provide further information on the species involved and the significance of their populations on an all-Ireland (Annex I species) and biogeographical context (regularly occurring migratory species).

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 <i>Podiceps cristatus</i>	2466 individuals 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 <i>Gavia stellata</i>	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 <i>Thalasseus sandvicensis</i>			
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 <i>Sterna hirundo</i>			
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 <i>Sterna paradisaea</i>			
Belfast Lough SPA	53 pairs Breeding	5 year mean (2010 - 2014)	
Outer Ards SPA	141 pairs Breeding	5 year mean (2010 - 2014)	
Copeland Islands SPA	954 pairs Breeding	5 year mean (2010 - 2014)	
Strangford Lough SPA	203 pairs Breeding	5 year mean (2010 - 2014)	
TOTAL	1351 pairs Breeding	5 year mean (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 <i>Puffinus puffinus</i>	4800 pairs 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 <i>Somateria mollissima</i>	3126 individuals Non-breeding	5 year mean (2010/11 - 2014/15)	0.30 % of the international biogeographical population > 90 % of the all-Ireland population

Waterbird data from annual WeBS programme coordinated by BTO

Further detail on the qualifying species:

Species in Annex I of the Birds Directive (2009/147/EC)

Red-throated Diver (*Gavia stellata*)

Red-throated Diver are relatively common in our coastal waters, migrating to the east coast of Northern Ireland from their breeding grounds in Iceland and other countries in northern Europe. Significant numbers have been recorded in Belfast Lough. They are particularly vulnerable to disturbance.

Sandwich Tern (*Thalasseus sandvicensis*)

Sandwich Tern are migratory visitors to Northern Ireland and breed in several colonies along the east coast. They use the expanse of the East Coast (Northern Ireland) marine area as a foraging habitat during their breeding season. They fly from their adjoining breeding colonies in the designated Larne Lough, Outer Ards, and Strangford Lough SPAs.

Sandwich Tern spend our winter around the coasts of the Mediterranean, and western and southern Africa. Increasingly some remain in Northern Irish waters through our winter.

Common Tern (*Sterna hirundo*)

Common Tern are migratory visitors to Northern Ireland and breed in several colonies along the east coast. They use the expanse of the East Coast (Northern Ireland) marine area as a foraging habitat during their breeding season. They fly from their adjoining breeding colonies in the designated Larne Lough, Belfast Lough, and Strangford Lough SPAs.

Common Tern spend our winter in coastal waters around southern Africa.

Arctic Tern (*Sterna paradisaea*)

Arctic Tern are migratory visitors to Northern Ireland and breed in several colonies along the east coast. They use the expanse of the East Coast (Northern Ireland) marine area as a foraging habitat during their breeding season. They fly from their adjoining breeding colonies in the designated Belfast Lough, Outer Ards, Copeland Islands, and Strangford Lough SPAs.

Arctic Tern spend our winter in in the southern hemisphere, where they enjoy a second summer around the Antarctic Coast.

Species relevant to Article 4.2 of the Birds Directive (2009/147/EC) -regularly occurring migratory species

Great Crested Grebe (*Podiceps cristatus*)

Great Crested Grebe winter outside of their breeding season along the east coast of Northern Ireland. The population on Belfast Lough is thought in part, to include breeding birds from Lough Neagh. The move from inland freshwater breeding sites to coastal wintering locations is typical for this fish-eating species.

Manx Shearwater (*Puffinus puffinus*)

Manx Shearwater breed on the Copeland Islands SPA. During our winter they migrate to the south Atlantic. This species can travel substantial distances to feed. Manx Shearwater use the waters around the Copeland Islands for their 'rafting' behaviour. This usually takes place in the evenings, during which time they wait for nightfall, so that they can safely return to their nesting burrows. They are vulnerable to attacks from predators such as Great black-backed gulls.

Eider Duck (*Somateria mollissima*)

The non-breeding population of Eider Duck in the East Coast (Northern Ireland) marine area is the largest aggregation of this species in the whole of the island of Ireland. This population includes birds which breed along the County Antrim and County Down coast, other birds from elsewhere along the Irish coast, and probably birds from Scotland as well.

9. SPAs and people

The East Coast (Northern Ireland) Marine SPA area has a wide range of both commercial and recreational users. There are businesses, industry, shipping, commercial fishing and shellfish production all taking place along this coast and in the marine waters of this proposed SPA.

There are several harbours along this coastline at Glenarm, Larne, Carrickfergus, Belfast, Donaghadee, and Portavogie. Belfast and Larne Ports are the two major maritime hubs of Northern Ireland, handling passenger ferries and freight shipping (AFBI, 2015). There is also a popular marina at Bangor. These all cater for passenger ferries, cruise ships, freight cargo shipping, fishing, and water-based recreational activities to varying degrees.

The proposed SPA means that any new projects, developments, or other significant activities within or beyond the site boundary will be assessed to ensure that they will have no direct or indirect impact on the birds and the habitats which support them. This already applies to the current extent of the Belfast Lough Open Water SPA, and the adjoining SPAs already designated along the east coast.

The objective for all interests is that commercial and recreational uses can take place in the East Coast (Northern Ireland) Marine SPA area without having a detrimental impact on the habitat which supports the ecological needs of the bird species, which depend on the habitats here. The commercial and recreational uses taking place in this area must go hand in hand with all the environmental objectives for the East Coast (Northern Ireland) Marine SPA.

Frequently Asked Questions (FAQs)**General background****What is a Special Protection Area?**

A Special Protection Area (SPA) is an area designated under the European Union's Directive on the Conservation of Wild Birds (generally referred to as the Birds Directive) (79/409/EEC), to protect nationally and internationally important populations of wild birds. Member States are required to designate (or classify) the most important areas on land or sea as SPAs to ensure the conservation of rare, vulnerable and migratory birds. The Birds

Directive is transposed into Northern Ireland legislation by ‘The Conservation (Natural Habitats, etc) Regulations (Northern Ireland) 1995 (as amended)’. This piece of legislation requires the Department of the Environment to designate areas as SPAs.

How many SPAs are there currently in Northern Ireland, and where can I find further information on these?

There are currently 16 sites designated as SPAs in Northern Ireland. If you wish to see further information on the sites designated as SPAs please visit;

<https://www.doeni.gov.uk/topics/land-and-landscapes/special-protection-areas>

What is a Natura 2000 (or N2K) site?

A Natura 2000 site is an area which has been designated by European Union (EU) Member States as a Special Protection Area (SPA) or a Special Area of Conservation (SAC). These sites make up the Natura 2000 network which refers to the network of nature conservation sites designated under the EU Birds and Habitat Directives. SACs are sites which are designated under the EU Habitats Directive (92/43/EEC).

Designation of SPAs

What is the purpose of SPA site designation?

SPA site designation is intended to protect key species of birds together with the habitat on which they depend. The Birds Directive focus's on the needs of rare, vulnerable and migratory birds which occur in an area. The Birds Directive was introduced in response to increasing concerns over declines in wild bird populations due to impacts from pollution, loss of habitats, and unsustainable exploitation. The designation of sites as SPAs is intended to contribute to a network of protected sites across Europe to provide protection to birds from habitat loss and degradation.

If you wish to read the full text of the latest codified version of the Birds Directive (2009/147/EC) and see the list of species please visit;

<http://eur-lex.europa.eu/LexUriServ/LexUriServ.do?uri=OJ:L:2010:020:0007:0025:EN:PDF>

What birds will be protected by the proposed SPAs?

A broad range of different bird species are listed in the Birds Directive as requiring protection in SPAs. To see a list of the qualifying bird species in the currently proposed SPA please refer to Section 8.

Why do these birds require protection?

These birds have been specified in the Birds Directive as requiring protection because they are rare, vulnerable or migratory species. These are the birds in Europe that are the most vulnerable on an international scale, or require international cooperation to protect them.

Article 4 of the Directive requires EU Member States to classify sites as SPAs for rare or vulnerable bird species which are listed in Annex I (Article 4.1), and also, for regularly occurring migratory species (Article 4.2).

How will SPA designation afford protection to the birds, and how will they benefit?

SPA designation will help to contribute to the conservation of the bird species which are the qualifying features of that designated land or sea area. The site will have been selected on a number of factors including population size, frequency of use, and in comparison with other sites.

Bodies tasked with maintaining the SPAs condition must implement measures and provide guidance to ensure that the habitats used by the bird species do not suffer from unsuitable disturbance, loss, or deterioration of habitat. Development plans or projects, or changes to existing activities, within or near these sites will have to be assessed to ensure that they do not impact on the bird populations.

The designation of a site as a SPA will also promote greater awareness of that site, and the bird species which it holds, on a local, national, and European scale. This provides obvious positive benefits for the promotion of the maintenance of biodiversity in that area and its wider hinterland.

How can a SPA designation benefit those people that live or work in an area?

The designation of an area of land or sea as a SPA can have many benefits to the people that live or work in that area and surrounding area. SPAs highlight some of the best sites in Northern Ireland for bird life and give recognition of that on a European scale. SPA site designation can attract visitors to an area, which has the potential to provide opportunities for social and economic benefits. Visitors could be attracted by the opportunity of possibly seeing a particular bird species in its natural habitat, and also knowing that species is afforded appropriate recognition and protection by the competent authorities.

Who decides that an area should be a SPA and how does that process take place?

The methodology used to select SPAs is done to identify the ‘most suitable territories in number and size’ as required by the Birds Directive. The decision to designate a site as a SPA is made on the basis of sound scientific evidence.

Are these birds not already protected under legislation?

Yes, ‘The Wildlife (Northern Ireland) Order 1985’ makes it an offence to intentionally kill, injure, or take any wild bird or their eggs or nests. ‘The Wildlife and Natural Environment Act (Northern Ireland) 2011’ amended the Wildlife Order by giving protection to a wider range of plants, animals and birds, and providing additional enforcement powers and increased penalties for wildlife related offences. The designation of a site as a SPA however, can ensure a greater level of protection for a population of birds and critically, the habitats on which they depend.

Why do we need to designate more sites as SPAs?

Firstly, it is an obligation under EU law that Northern Ireland complies with the Birds Directive to designate our most important bird habitats as SPAs. Many sites are already designated as SPAs across Northern Ireland, but as more is known about the areas used by the rare, vulnerable or migratory birds in Northern Ireland, we need to designate more areas to protect the habitats used by these birds to prevent loss or degradation of these habitats. It is recognised in particular, that we need to designate more SPAs in our marine areas to reflect the importance of the marine environment for the conservation of the birds that use the marine areas off Northern Ireland's coast.

Why can't the existing boundary of a SPA provide protection for the species?

If a site is currently designated as a SPA or close to a SPA, it may now be the case with new scientific understanding, that the area of land or sea already designated may not provide adequate protection for the full ecological needs of that species. For instance, greater understanding of where Tern species forage in UK marine waters has meant that the UK conservation agencies have had to review the current extent of their marine SPA network.

Management of the SPAs

Who is responsible for the management of SPA sites?

No one organisation is responsible for the management of an SPA. There can be several land owners, businesses, and competent authorities involved. Authorities with a remit for planning control and the regulation of activities in an area will have to ensure that development and activities do not have a detrimental impact on the birds and their habitat.

Who assesses the condition of the SPA sites?

The Department of the Environment's Northern Ireland Environment Agency is responsible for assessing the condition of the SPA sites in Northern Ireland. The objective as set out in the legislation is to make sure the populations of the birds and their habitats are in a 'favourable conservation status'. Individual conservation objectives are prepared to document the conservation requirements for each SPA and the feature species.

Who monitors a SPA to check that the birds are maintaining their population?

The SPA will need to be monitored to assess how the population of birds for which the site is designated, are maintaining their population. This will be to check that the populations are in a good condition, and that the site is being used and managed in a way that is favourable to the bird population. The Birds Directive requires that regular reports on the conservation status of all Annex I and regularly occurring migratory species listed in the Directive, are sent to the European Commission. The monitoring information will come from a variety of sources such as the WeBS (Wetland Bird Survey) coordinated by the British Trust for Ornithology, and seabird monitoring coordinated by the Joint Nature Conservation Committee (JNCC). Monitoring is typically undertaken annually as part of wider standard bird survey programmes.

What activities could affect the birds on a SPA site?

Many different types of activities could affect the population of birds on a SPA. These activities could result in;

- injuring or killing of the birds;
- the deterioration or destruction of their habitat;
- a reduction or displacement of their prey; and
- noise or visual disturbance of the birds.

On a coastal or marine SPA these activities or pressures could be due to; oil pollution, seabed habitat damage and/or fish prey removal either directly or indirectly through fishing activities, collision with, or displacement caused by renewable energy or other structures, and seabed habitat damage due to aggregate extraction.

Other specific pressures in a coastal or marine environment could include; shipping, commercial and recreational boating, dredging, coastal defence schemes, development along the coast or in the marine area, discharges of industrial or sewage effluent, disposal of waste, changes in land management, aquaculture (including ‘bait-digging’), predation at breeding bird sites, scientific research activities, and general disturbance by recreational activities.

Further information on activities which may adversely impact (or positively benefit) the proposed SPA, can be found in the accompanying Regulatory Impact Assessment for Marine Special Protection Areas in the Northern Ireland inshore region.

How will my current activity be affected by the designation of a SPA?

It is likely that your current activity in the area of a SPA will notice little change with designation. The SPA sites already designated in Northern Ireland have a variety of different users and these uses have been managed for more than 15 years now to ensure that they do not cause a detrimental effect on the sites, without much change for the parties involved.

If you have queries on how the designation of a SPA could affect your activity, or you intend to make changes to your current activity, please use the contact details at the end of this document to discuss these with NIEA.

How will new activities, or new developments be affected by the designation of a SPA?

The designation of an area as a SPA does not automatically mean a prohibition on new activities or development in that land or sea area. The competent authorities will have to carefully consider any plans or projects that could affect the SPA. This will include the requirement for a Habitats Regulations Assessment to be undertaken to assess whether the development will adversely affect the SPA. This is likely to be informed by the need for additional survey and/or research as necessary and will then ensure that the proposed development will not conflict with the conservation objectives for the SPA.

Our overall aim is achieve the conservation objectives for the SPA with the least possible impact on activities in the areas.

Next steps

The cover letter issued with the documents gives further detail on the next stages of this consultation on the proposed SPAs.

How does the consultation process work?

The Conservation (Nature Habitats, etc.) Regulations (Northern Ireland) 1995 places a statutory obligation on the Department of the Environment in relation to the classification of SPAs. Regulation 8A requires the issue of a notice of the proposed classification to every landowner or occupier so affected, and this will specify the time within which representations with respect to the proposal may be made to the Department.

How will my views be considered?

The consultation provides the opportunity for your views to be taken into account on the proposed SPAs. It provides the opportunity to ask questions about the proposals and to understand the implications of SPA site designation.

How do I submit comments on this proposal?

The cover letter issued as part of the consultation documents will advise on how, and who to write to with views.

Where can I find further information?

Northern Ireland Environment Agency
Conservation Designations and Protection
Klondyke Building
Cromac Avenue
Gasworks Business Park
Malone Lower
Belfast
BT7 2JA

Telephone: 028 9056 9548

Email: cdp@doeni.gov.uk

Website: <https://www.doeni.gov.uk/topics/land-and-landscapes/protected-areas>

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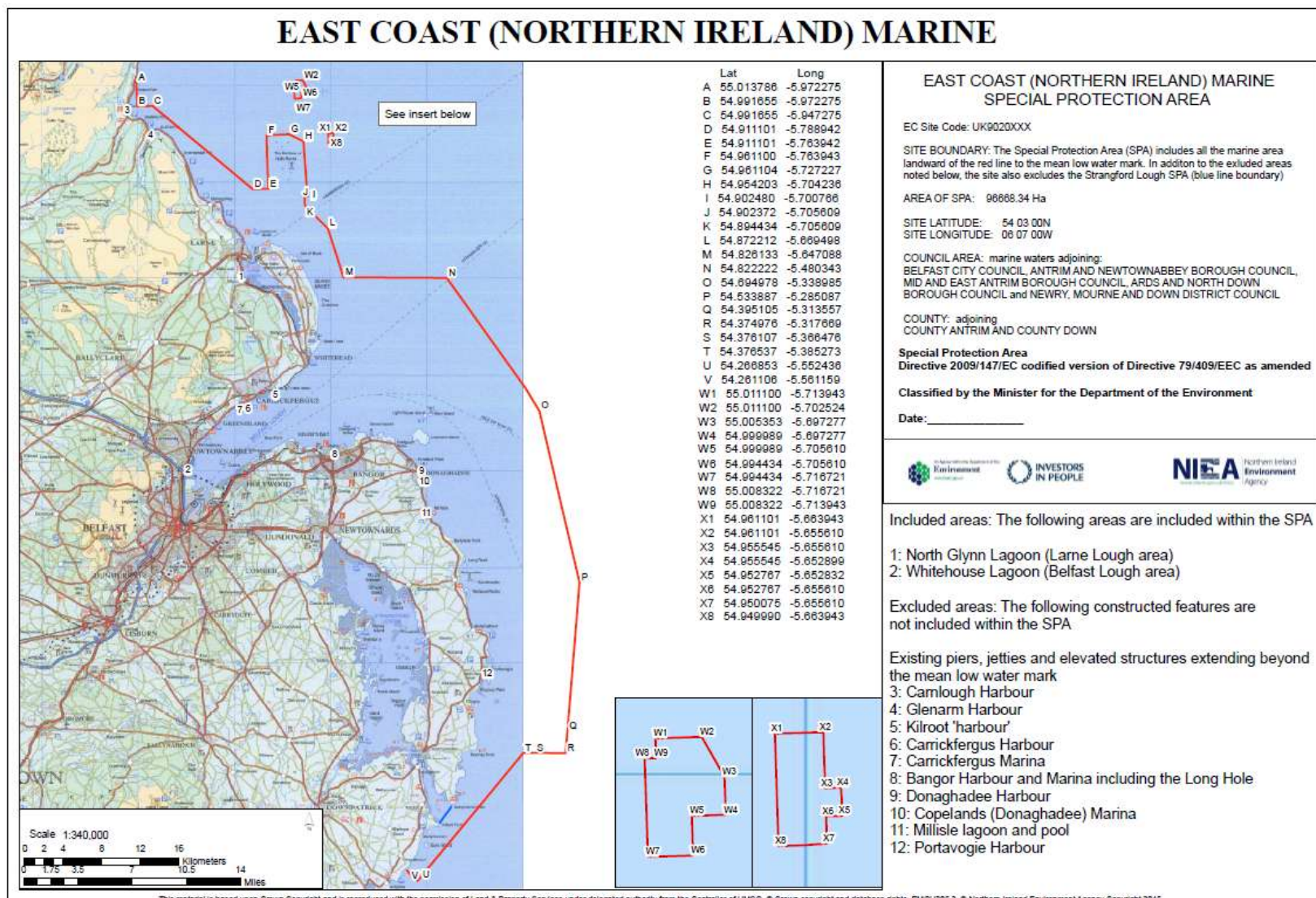


Figure 1: East Coast (Northern Ireland) Marine SPA all the marine area landward of the red line to the mean low water mark. In addition to the excluded areas noted, the site also excludes the Strangford Lough SPA (blue line boundary)