



Department  
for Environment  
Food & Rural Affairs

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# **Marine Conservation Zones: Update**

**January 2016**



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PB 14386

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# Introduction

As set out in the manifesto<sup>1</sup>, the government is committed to delivering a Blue Belt of Marine Protected Areas (MPAs) around our coasts. These will protect precious species and habitats in our seas.

The Blue Belt is made up of different types of MPAs. These are Marine Conservation Zones (MCZs), which are called Nature Conservation MPAs in Scotland, Special Areas of Conservation (SACs)<sup>2</sup>, Special Protection Areas (SPAs)<sup>3</sup>, Sites or Areas of Special Scientific Interest (SSSIs/ASSIs)<sup>4</sup> and Ramsar sites<sup>5</sup>. MPAs are just one of the measures we are taking to ensure clean, healthy, safe, productive and biologically diverse seas.

We have already made good progress in designating a network of sites in the Blue Belt. Over 17% of UK waters and almost a third of English inshore waters are now within MPAs, including the 23 MCZs designated today.

In addition to these 23 new MCZs, consultations are also starting on SACs for harbour porpoise, and 7 SPAs for seabirds.

We are seeking to fill the remaining gaps in the Blue Belt through a third and final tranche of MCZs. This document outlines the principles and approaches that we will take to selecting the final tranche of sites.

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<sup>1</sup> <https://www.conservatives.com/manifesto>

<sup>2</sup> SACs protect habitats listed in Annex I and species listed in Annex II of the Habitats directive (92/43/EEC). There are currently 99 SACs with marine components un UK waters.

<sup>3</sup> SPAs protect birds listed in Annex I of the Wild Birds directive (2009/147/EC) and migratory species. There are currently 102 SPAs with marine components in UK waters.

<sup>4</sup> SSSIs are designated under the Wildlife and Countryside Act 1981. These sites can be designated for either biological or geological interest.

<sup>5</sup> Ramsar sites, which are wetlands of international importance, designated under the Ramsar Convention. This includes marine areas with a water depth at low tide of less than six metres. Ramsar sites are generally also underpinned by designation as SSSIs.

# 1. Ecologically Coherent Network

The Blue Belt provides vital protection to habitats and species as well as important geological features in our seas. It also forms part of a wider international network, contributing to an ecologically coherent network of MPAs in the north east Atlantic. This network will be made up of different MPAs, each of which protects examples of marine biodiversity, and will together achieve benefits more effectively than individual MPAs can achieve alone. An ecologically coherent network will contain sites of different sizes, containing different habitats and species, connected by movements of species at varying stages of their lifecycles.

Our approach to designating the Blue Belt is underpinned by the OSPAR Commission guidance<sup>6</sup> on developing an ecologically coherent network of MPAs. We identified seven MPA network design principles (Defra 2010<sup>7</sup>) based upon the OSPAR Commission guidance (see Box 1). Natural England and the Joint Nature Conservation Committee (JNCC) used these principles to develop the Ecological Network Guidance<sup>8</sup>. This guidance formed the practical guidelines to support MCZ selection.

## Box 1 - Defra MPA network design principles

**Representativity** – the MPA network should represent the range of marine habitats and species through protecting all major habitat types and associated biological communities present in our marine area.

**Replication** – all major habitats should be replicated and distributed throughout the network. The amount of replication will depend on the extent and distribution of features within our seas.

**Viability** – the MPA network should incorporate self-sustaining, geographically dispersed component sites of sufficient size to ensure species' and habitats' persistence through natural cycles of variation.

**Adequacy** – the MPA network should be of adequate size to deliver its ecological objectives and ensure the ecological viability and integrity of populations, species and communities. The proportion of each feature included within the MPA network should be sufficient to enable its long-term protection and/or recovery.

**Connectivity** – the MPA network should seek to maximise and enhance the linkages among individual MPAs using the best current science. For certain species this will mean that sites should be distributed to ensure protection at different stages in their life cycles.

**Protection** – the MPA network is likely to include a range of protection levels. These could range from highly protected sites or parts of sites where no extractive, depositional or other damaging activities are allowed, to areas with only minimal restrictions on activities that are needed to protect the features.

**Best available evidence** - Network design should be based on the best information currently available. Lack of full scientific certainty should not be a reason for postponing proportionate decisions on site selection.

<sup>6</sup> <http://www.ospar.org/>

<sup>7</sup> [Defra \(2010\) Guidance on selection and designation of Marine Conservation Zones \(Note 1\), Department for Environment, Food and Rural Affairs.](#)

<sup>8</sup> [Natural England and the Joint Nature Conservation Committee \(2010\), The Marine Conservation Zone Project: Ecological Network Guidance. Sheffield and Peterborough, UK](#)

MCZs protect some species directly, as well as protecting habitats as a proxy for the marine life they host. These habitats are usually named in terms of describing their main physical characteristics, e.g. “subtidal sand”. However, the importance of protecting them is primarily for their value as environments for the plant and animal life that lives within and on them. We know that the same habitat in different environments can host a different range of life. For example, different species live on deeper seabeds compared to those in the shallower waters along our shores. These factors are being actively considered in selecting sites to complete the Blue Belt.

As new evidence has become available throughout the designation process, we have developed our approach to meet our new understanding. JNCC and Natural England have provided scientific advice to inform decisions. These decisions are summarised below.

## Biogeographic regions

In 2012, Defra and the devolved administrations published a statement<sup>9</sup> on the UK contribution to the ecologically coherent network in the North East Atlantic. This is a commitment to develop a network of MPAs based on biogeographic regions (geographic areas of biological communities that have similar or shared characteristics), rather than administrative regions. We have been working with the devolved administrations, the JNCC and national conservation agencies to take stock of the habitats and species protected in existing and planned MPAs, on a biogeographical basis<sup>10</sup>. This has helped to inform the analysis undertaken by the JNCC<sup>11</sup> to identify gaps within the MPA network in our waters.

We are using this analysis to identify gaps in the network that could be filled by the remainder of the 127 recommended MCZs which were not already designated or removed from consideration. More information on how these 127 site recommendations were developed is in section two of this document.

## MCZ features

There have been some limited changes to the list of features protected by MCZs. Changes to this list, and the reasons for these are listed in Annex A, and a revised list of all MCZ features is in Annex B. JNCC and Natural England will be publishing a full review of features protected in MCZs shortly.

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<sup>9</sup> Joint Administrations Statement. 2012. UK Contribution to Ecologically Coherent MPA Network in the North East Atlantic. Available online at <http://www.scotland.gov.uk/Resource/0041/00411304.pdf>

<sup>10</sup> Assessments were made using regions identified here <http://chartingprogress.defra.gov.uk/regional-basis-charting-progress-2> These are not based on administrative boundaries, but on the 11 biogeographic regions identified as part of the Review of Marine Nature Conservation (RMNC) 2004, principally using physical and biological features such as tidal fronts and seabed flora and fauna.

<sup>11</sup> <http://jncc.defra.gov.uk/page-7119>

## 2. Progress with MCZ designations

The initial recommendations for sites to protect as MCZs were made by four stakeholder-led Regional Projects, established by the JNCC and Natural England. The projects brought together a wide range of stakeholders, including environmental non-government organisations, fishermen and other sea users, to develop proposals for MCZs. The Regional Projects made recommendations for 127 MCZ locations in September 2011<sup>12</sup>.

The Regional Projects made impressive progress in building consensus among those with often strongly contrasting views. However, independent scientific advice<sup>13</sup> on the recommendations concluded that there were a number of gaps and limitations in the scientific evidence base. As a result of this, Ministers announced that MCZs would be designated in tranches, with the best evidenced sites being designated first. We also provided additional funding for evidence gathering to support the MCZ designation process.

In 2013 we designated the first tranche of 27 MCZs, covering nearly 9,700 km<sup>2</sup> of seabed. In January 2016 we have designated 23 further sites in a second tranche. These 23 sites protect an additional 10,760 km<sup>2</sup> of seabed. This second tranche of sites was selected to fill the 'big gaps' in the network. A big gap is where, for example, a species or habitat is currently not protected in a region, or only protected in one location, or only a very small proportion is protected.

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<sup>12</sup> Details of the regional project recommendations, together with the consideration of their economic and social impacts can be found here <http://publications.naturalengland.org.uk/publication/2071071>

<sup>13</sup> [https://www.gov.uk/government/uploads/system/uploads/attachment\\_data/file/69451/sap-mcz-final-report.pdf](https://www.gov.uk/government/uploads/system/uploads/attachment_data/file/69451/sap-mcz-final-report.pdf)

### 3. Selecting sites for the third tranche

We are committed to completing a Blue Belt of Marine Protected Areas. A third tranche of MCZs will be designated to fill the remaining gaps in the network.

#### Sites being considered

We will select sites for consultation from the remainder of the 127 sites put forward by the Regional Projects that have not already been designated or removed from consideration. We will select sites on the basis of the contribution they provide to the network. We are assessing this contribution against the latest analysis of remaining ecological gaps within the network<sup>14</sup>.

We are no longer considering sites in offshore waters adjacent to Wales. This is because, since these sites were put forward by the Regional Projects, the Silk Commission<sup>15</sup> on Welsh devolution recommended that marine conservation in the offshore area adjacent to Wales should be devolved to the Welsh Government. The UK Government has agreed to this recommendation<sup>16</sup>, which is included in the Wales Bill. It will, therefore, be for the Welsh government to consider suitable provision of MCZs in their offshore waters as part of their ongoing programme to designate MCZs. These sites are:

- Celtic Deep,
- East of Celtic Deep,
- Mid St George's Channel,
- North of Celtic Deep and
- North St George's Channel.

As with the previous tranches, we will select sites for the third tranche which achieve an appropriate balance between ecological benefits and the social and economic costs associated with designation, and which are supported by adequate ecological evidence.

#### Evidence requirements

The network will continue to be based on best available evidence of where features are located. The network will be considered complete in terms of the best available evidence. Where we do not have sufficient evidence of the presence of a feature in a region, we cannot make further designations in that region to protect that feature. This would not be considered a gap in the network.

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<sup>14</sup> <http://jncc.defra.gov.uk/page-7119>

<sup>15</sup> <http://www.assembly.wales/en/bus-home/research/Pages/research-silk-commission.aspx>

<sup>16</sup> <https://www.gov.uk/government/publications/powers-for-a-purpose-towards-a-lasting-devolution-settlement-for-wales>



In some cases we have evidence that a feature does exist in a region, but the sites recommended by the Regional Projects may not be suitable for designation, or may not provide enough protection for the feature. In these cases, we have asked Natural England and the JNCC to identify a small number of new sites that could be considered for designation. This will help to fill these gaps and ensure the network is complete.

To complete the Blue Belt we will have a comprehensive third tranche, made up of well-evidenced sites which fill network gaps. This will help safeguard sustainable, productive and healthy seas.

Stakeholders may wish to offer new evidence on the benefits or impacts of designation. We can only use evidence which meets the criteria in Defra's Evidence Investment Strategy<sup>17</sup>. Natural England, in partnership with the Wildlife Trusts, have developed best-practice guidelines for data providers on collecting and submitting scientific data to support designation of MCZs<sup>18</sup>. It is helpful if evidence is provided as early as possible. This will allow greater scope for Natural England and the JNCC to resolve any issues and ensure we can use all relevant data to inform decisions. You can read more about how we use evidence in section four of the consultation on the second tranche of MCZs<sup>19</sup>.

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<sup>17</sup> <https://www.gov.uk/government/publications/defra-s-evidence-investment-strategy-2010-to-2013-and-beyond-2011-update>

<sup>18</sup> <http://jncc.defra.gov.uk/page-6658>

<sup>19</sup> <https://consult.defra.gov.uk/marine/tranche2mczs>

## 4. Next steps

As with the second tranche of MCZs, we will work closely with local and national stakeholders before the formal consultation. This will help us understand the benefits and impacts of designating potential sites. It will also help us to consider options to allow the conservation aims to be achieved whilst minimising the impact on sea users. In order to help stakeholders to understand what designation will mean for them, we will also provide as much information as possible on what management measures could be.

These discussions will involve a range of marine stakeholders and will be taking place until autumn 2016. We will then select sites for formal consultation in 2017, and make designations in 2018.

We recognise that to complete a Blue Belt of MPAs around our coasts we need to make progress with designating new features and sites while simultaneously securing appropriate management for existing sites. That is why we want to identify fisheries management measures for any new sites within two years of designation. For activities that require a licence (e.g. developments, aggregate dredging), MCZs are taken into account when considering licence applications from the point the MCZs are consulted on. We will continue to work with Regulators and the JNCC and Natural England to ensure that stakeholders with an interest in both designation and management of MPAs can engage in this process.

# Annex A: Summary of changes to the feature list

## European eel

MCZs are no longer considered to be an appropriate tool for the protection of the European eel (*Anguilla anguilla*). They have been identified as habitat generalists for whom it is particularly difficult to identify unique nursery or foraging grounds. This is due to their wide distribution across coastal and freshwater zones. We consider that we can achieve conservation and management of European eels more effectively through the Eel Regulations<sup>20</sup> and Eel Management Plans<sup>21</sup>.

## Subtidal sands and gravels

We consider that the habitat 'subtidal sands and gravels' is adequately protected by its component habitat features, subtidal sand and/or subtidal coarse sediment. Subtidal sand and gravels is therefore no longer included within MCZ designations.

## Mud habitats in deep water

We have removed this feature from designation, as designating the habitat subtidal mud provides adequate protection for this feature.

## Sea snail

Sea snail (*Paludinella littorina*) was removed from schedule 5 of the Wildlife and Countryside Act in 2008. This is because it was found to be more common and widespread than previously thought. We are therefore not designating this species as a feature in MCZs.

## Fan mussel

We had previously been referring to the fan mussel as *Atrina pectinata*. This name has in the past been incorrectly used when identifying the European variety of fan mussel, but is in fact an Indo-Pacific species. We are now referring to the fan mussel as *Atrina fragilis*. This correction was made before the consultation on the second tranche. This feature was not designated in any first tranche sites.

## Stalked jellyfish

The stalked jellyfish species *Haliclystus auricula* is now referred to as 'Haliclystus species', to account for the potential presence of *Haliclystus octoradiatus* that has not been consistently differentiated within scientific records. These species are therefore now considered jointly.

## File shell beds

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<sup>20</sup> Council Regulation (EC) No 1100/2007

<sup>21</sup> <https://www.gov.uk/government/policies/managing-freshwater-fisheries/supporting-pages/increasing-eel-stocks>

There are records of file shells (*Limaria hians*) as individuals across UK waters however the only known occurrences of this species aggregating into beds are in Scottish waters. Consequently file shell beds are not currently be considered for designation in MCZs.

## Annex B: List of features

The full list of features which are protected by MCZs is as follows:

### Broadscale Marine Habitats

High energy intertidal rock  
Moderate energy intertidal rock  
Low energy intertidal rock  
Intertidal coarse sediment  
Intertidal sand and muddy sand  
Intertidal mud  
Intertidal mixed sediments  
Coastal saltmarshes and saline reedbeds  
Intertidal sediments dominated by aquatic angiosperms  
Intertidal biogenic reef  
High energy infralittoral rock  
Moderate energy infralittoral rock  
Low energy infralittoral rock  
High energy circalittoral rock  
Moderate energy circalittoral rock  
Low energy circalittoral rock  
Subtidal coarse sediment  
Subtidal sand  
Subtidal mud  
Subtidal mixed sediments  
Subtidal macrophyte-dominated sediment  
Subtidal biogenic reefs  
Deep sea bed

### Marine habitats

Blue Mussel (*Mytilus edulis*) beds  
Cold-water coral reefs  
Coral Gardens  
Deep-sea sponge aggregations  
Estuarine rocky habitats  
Fragile sponge & anthozoan communities on subtidal rocky habitats  
Intertidal underboulder communities  
Littoral chalk communities  
Maerl beds  
Horse mussel (*Modiolus modiolus*) beds  
Sea-pen and burrowing megafauna communities  
Native oyster (*Ostrea edulis*) beds  
Peat and clay exposures  
Honeycomb worm (*Sabellaria alveolata*) reefs  
Ross worm (*Sabellaria spinulosa*) reefs

Seagrass beds  
Sheltered muddy gravels  
Subtidal chalk  
Tide-swept channels

### Species of Marine Fauna

Peacock's tail (*Padina pavonica*)  
Burgundy maerl paint weed (*Cruoria cruoriaeformis*)  
Grateloup's little-lobed weed (*Grateloupia montagnei*)  
Coral maerl (*Lithothamnion corallioides*)  
Common maerl (*Phymatolithon calcareum*)  
Tentacled lagoon-worm (*Alkmaria romijni*)  
Lagoon sandworm (*Armandia cirrhosa*)  
Giant goby (*Gobius cobitis*)  
Couch's goby (*Gobius couchi*)  
Long snouted seahorse (*Hippocampus guttulatus*)  
Short snouted seahorse (*Hippocampus hippocampus*)  
Trembling sea mat (*Victorella pavida*)  
Sea-fan anemone (*Amphianthus dohrnii*)  
Pink sea-fan (*Eunicella verrucosa*)  
Sunset cup coral (*Leptopsammia pruvoti*)  
Stalked jellyfish (*Haliclystus species*)  
Stalked jellyfish (*Lucernariopsis campanulata*)  
Stalked jellyfish (*Lucernariopsis cruxmelitensis*)  
Starlet sea anemone (*Nematostella vectensis*)  
Lagoon sand shrimp (*Gammarus insensibilis*)  
Amphipod shrimp (*Gitanopsis bispinosa*)  
Gooseneck barnacle (*Pollicipes pollicipes*)  
Spiny lobster (*Palinurus elephas*)  
Ocean quahog (*Arctica islandica*)  
Fan mussel (*Atrina fragilis*)  
Defolin's lagoon snail (*Caecum armoricum*)  
Native oyster (*Ostrea edulis*)  
Lagoon sea slug (*Tenellia adspersa*)  
Smelt (*Osmerus eperlanus*)  
Undulate ray (*Raja undulata*)  
Black seabream (*Spondyllosoma cantharus*)