

WRITTEN MINISTERIAL STATEMENT

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Environment

CREATION OF A NETWORK OF MARINE PROTECTED AREAS

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Mr Durkan (The Minister of the Environment): The Marine Act (Northern Ireland) 2013 (the Act) creates new powers for the Department of the Environment (the Department), with the agreement of the Secretary of State, to designate Marine Conservation Zones (MCZs) in Northern Ireland's inshore region to protect nationally important marine habitats and species.

Section 20(7) of the Act places a duty on the Department to make a statement about the principles which it intends to follow when designating MCZs to help contribute to the creation of a UK MPA network.

This statement fulfils the duty in section 20(7) of the Act.

Within the context of devolution, administrations are working together to deliver a coherent network of well managed Marine protected Areas (MPAs). They have issued a 'Joint Administrations Statement'¹ outlining the UK contribution to an ecologically coherent MPA network in the North East Atlantic.

The Northern Ireland MPA network will encompass a range of different types of protected areas including:

- Special Areas of Conservation (SACs) for habitats of European importance;
- Special Protection Areas (SPAs) for seabirds of European importance;
- Areas of Special Scientific Interest (ASSIs) for nationally important habitats and species;
- Ramsar sites for wetlands;
- Marine Nature Reserves (MNRs) for nationally important habitats and species. Strangford Lough MNR became a MCZ on enactment of the Bill.

MCZs, along with existing protected sites in our marine environment, will contribute to achieving Good Environmental Status (GES) under the Marine Strategy Framework Directive (MSFD) by 2020 and deliver our contribution to the ecologically coherent network of MPAs under the OSPAR convention on the protection of the marine environment in the North East Atlantic.

The concept of an ecologically coherent network is still evolving and no clear definition is agreed as yet. However, guidance has been developed under the OSPAR Convention (OSPAR 2006)² on the key design features associated with establishing an ecologically coherent network. The Department

¹ <http://archive.defra.gov.uk/environment/marine/documents/protected/mpa-network-joint-admin-statement-201212.pdf>

² http://www.ospar.org/documents/DBASE/DECRECS/Agreements/06-03e_Guidance%20ecol%20coherence%20MPA%20network.doc

has adopted seven MPA network design principles from the OSPAR Commission guidance. The following design principles will be used as the basis for MCZ selection:

Representativity	the network should represent the range of marine habitats and species present in Northern Ireland's territorial waters;
Replication	ensure replication of habitats and species with other parts of the UK as appropriate to achieve an overall network;
Adequacy	the network should be of adequate size to deliver its ecological objectives and ensure long-term protection and/or recovery;
Viability	the network should be made up of self-sustaining, geographically dispersed component sites of sufficient size large enough to ensure habitats and species are self sustaining;
Connectivity	ensure the network has linkages among individual MPAs and between regional networks;
Management	MCZs should be managed to ensure protection of the feature(s) for which they were selected and to support the functioning of an ecologically coherent network;
Best available science	the designation of MCZs should be based on the best information which is currently available. Where there is a lack of full scientific certainty this should not be used as a reason for postponing decisions on the selection of sites.

The OSPAR Commission guidance is being used by the other UK administrations as the basis for network design.

In Northern Ireland, marine conservation is focusing on habitats and species that are important in the local context. The network will focus on protecting a range of representative and threatened, rare or declining species and habitats – referred collectively as Priority Marine Features. The site selection process is adaptive to allow for the incorporation of new data on the location, condition and effects of pressures on the features to be protected.

These Priority Marine Features will form the basis of MCZ designation and include marine species, habitats and geological (including geomorphological) features. Many of these features occur in the existing SAC/ASSI network. Examples include common skate, oceanic quahog, seagrass beds, maerl beds and deep mud habitats.

A fundamental principle of the Department's approach to marine nature conservation is that conservation should be integrated with productive and sustainable use of the seas. It is important therefore that users of the seas should be actively involved in our conservation policy and that the MPA network and its sites are well understood and supported. The Department encourages the co-existence of MCZs and economic, cultural and social activities where they are mutually compatible as this exemplifies the key spirit of sustainable development.

The Department will base its decisions on the best available science and will draw on the scientific expertise of the Northern Ireland Environment Agency, Marine Division, Department of Agriculture and Rural Development, Agri-Food and Biosciences Institute, Joint Nature Conservation Committee, Loughs Agency, National Museums Northern Ireland, Queens University Belfast and the University of Ulster together with other evidence from the wider scientific community and sea-user communities. The Department acknowledges that some evidence may be uncertain or incomplete.

The Department is clear that once designated, effective management is essential to ensure the delivery of the conservation objectives of a MCZ and thereby ensure the site's contribution to the MPA network. The conservation objectives will reflect the purpose of the MCZ, namely to protect, prevent deterioration or contribute to the recovery of the feature(s) and will be specific to each feature within

each MCZ. There will be differing conservation objectives for sites which will set out any maintenance or recovery measures that will be required to achieve favourable condition.

The Department will work with stakeholders including public authorities when developing recommendations about any management actions and options to introduce specific measures deemed necessary to deliver the conservation objectives for MCZ features. Management of activities in or affecting MCZs will be determined on a site-by-site basis. The Department will manage unregulated activities through bylaws and common enforcement powers.

As part of the management process and to account for a marine environment which varies both naturally and under anthropogenic pressures, MCZs can be de-selected, modified, or moved to ensure they are still protecting the feature(s) they were designated to protect, or to ensure they continue to fulfil their contribution to the network.

The Department considers the approach to selecting, designating and managing MCZs as well as the ecologically coherent network to which they contribute, will significantly contribute to achieving the vision of a clean, healthy, safe, productive and biologically diverse marine and coastal environment.

This statement of principles will be kept under review, and the Department will continue to keep the Northern Ireland Executive informed of any key developments.

Copies of this statement will be laid in the Northern Ireland Assembly.