



NatureScot

Scotland's Nature Agency
Buidheann Nàdair na h-Alba

Conservation and Management Advice

SULE SKERRY AND SULE STACK SPA

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This document provides advice to Public Authorities and stakeholders about the activities that may affect the protected features of Sule Skerry and Sule Stack Special Protection Area (SPA). It provides advice from Scottish Natural Heritage (SNH) (operating under the name of and hereinafter referred to as NatureScot) under Regulation 33(2) of the Conservation (Natural Habitats, &c.) Regulations 1994 (as amended in Scotland) to other relevant authorities on the Conservation Objectives for the Sule Skerry and Sule Stack SPA, and any operations which may cause deterioration of natural habitats or the habitats of species, or disturbance of species for which the site has been designated. It covers a range of different activities and developments but is not exhaustive. It focuses on where there is a risk to achieving the Conservation Objectives. The paper does not attempt to cover all possible future activities or eventualities (e.g. as a result of accidents), and does not consider cumulative effects.

Further information on marine protected areas and management is available at -

<https://www.gov.scot/policies/marine-environment/marine-protected-areas/>

For the full range of MPA site documents and more on the fascinating range of marine life to be found in Scotland's seas, please visit -

www.nature.scot/mpas or <https://jncc.gov.uk/advice/marine-protected-areas/>

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Contents

1	OVERVIEW OF DOCUMENT	4
2	INTRODUCTION	4
2.1	Purpose statement	4
2.2	Conservation benefits	4
2.3	Wider benefits	5
2.4	Contribution to policy commitments	6
3	ROLES	7
4	PROTECTED FEATURES AND STATUS	7
5	SETTING CONSERVATION OBJECTIVES	8
5.1	Background	8
5.2	Relationship between feature condition and Conservation Objectives	8
5.3	Conservation priorities	9
5.4	Overlapping Protected Areas	10
6	FEATURE SENSITIVITY	10
6.1	Atlantic puffin (breeding) and common guillemot (breeding)	10
6.2	European shag (breeding)	10
6.3	European storm petrel (breeding)	11
6.4	Leach's storm petrel (breeding)	11
6.5	Northern gannet (breeding)	11
7	MANAGEMENT	11
7.1	Conservation Measures	11
7.2	Advice to support management	12
7.3	Best Practice	13
8	RESEARCH AND SURVEY	18
	ANNEX 1. SULE SKERRY AND SULE STACK SPA CONSERVATION OBJECTIVES	19
	ANNEX 2. SUPPORTING INFORMATION	40
	Factors determining the potential for feature recovery.	40
	ANNEX 3: GLOSSARY FOR CONSERVATION OBJECTIVES AND REFERENCES	45
	Glossary	45
	References	46

1 Overview of document

This document provides details of the Conservation and Management Advice for the Sule Skerry and Sule Stack Special Protection Area (SPA) and it is divided into eight main sections. The introduction in section 2 gives an overview of the Sule Skerry and Sule Stack SPA and its contribution in terms of conservation and wider benefits. Section 3 provides an overview of the roles of the various bodies involved with advising, regulating and managing the SPA. Section 4 describes the protected features and their condition, and section 5 introduces the Conservation Objectives for the site. Section 6 describes the threats and pressures to which the protected features are sensitive, and section 7 provides the management advice for these activities. Section 8 identifies what further research and surveys may be required to increase our understanding of how the protected features utilise the marine protected area.

Annex 1 sets out the Sule Skerry and Sule Stack SPA Conservation Objectives. Annex 2 provides supporting information relating to the protected features.

Throughout this document the term Special Protection Area (SPA) is used in relation to the site name, e.g. Sule Skerry and Sule Stack SPA or in discussion of the specific legislation relating to the site. Otherwise the term Marine Protected Area (MPA) is used when discussing the MPA network generally. The term *qualifying features* is used in the Conservation Objectives to refer to those Annex 1 and regularly occurring migratory bird species that the Sule Skerry and Sule Stack SPA has specifically been designated to protect. Within the wider document text, the term *protected features* is used to refer both to these specific site features and more generally to species or habitats protected through MPA designations.

2 Introduction

2.1 Purpose statement

The Sule Skerry and Sule Stack SPA has been designated to protect six species of breeding seabirds, a seabird breeding assemblage and their supporting habitats. By doing so it contributes to the Scottish, UK and OSPAR MPA networks, the conservation of the wider marine environment around Scotland, and progress towards Good Environmental Status within the North-East Atlantic marine region.

The main purpose of the Sule Skerry and Sule Stack SPA is to contribute towards the [Favourable Conservation Status](#) of the protected features in the Marine Atlantic Biogeographic Region. The Conservation Objectives form the framework for establishing appropriate management measures and assessing all future plans and projects that have the potential to affect the protected features of the SPA.

2.2 Conservation benefits

The conservation benefits for the Sule Skerry and Sule Stack SPA are:

- Protecting important numbers of European storm petrel (1-6% of the GB population) and Leach's storm petrel (<0.1% of the GB population), Annex 1 rare and vulnerable species.
- Protecting internationally important numbers of gannets (around 2.2% of the world biogeographic population), and puffin (around 5% of the biogeographic population).
- Protecting nationally important numbers other seabirds during the breeding season including: guillemot (0.9% of the GB population) and shag (around 2.3% of the GB population).

- Protecting important waters immediately surrounding the seabird breeding colony, which birds use for resting, preening and other maintenance activities.
- Protecting important cliff habitats where the seabird protected features can nest.
- Protecting waters with rich marine habitats, including important shelf waters with areas of high productivity, that support a diversity of pelagic and demersal fish, bivalve molluscs, gastropods and crustaceans where the seabirds can feed.

2.3 Wider benefits

The protected features of the Sule Skerry and Sule Stack SPA provide ecosystem services locally and to the wider marine ecosystem. We describe these ecosystem services in terms of their functions (the support or provision of something to the wider ecosystem e.g. habitat, nutrient cycling, sediment stabilisation) and natural resources (e.g. fish and shellfish, aggregates, wildlife), which in turn lead to benefits for people.

Figure 1 illustrates how the protected features of the Sule Skerry and Sule Stack SPA contribute to benefits for people. There can be many complex interactions and dependencies amongst the protected features, their functions, associated natural resources and the benefits we gain from them.

The protected features, especially when taken within the context of the whole SPA and/or local ecosystem, contribute to certain functions more than others, e.g. biomass production and nutrient cycling and are fundamental to the continued supply of natural resources and benefits associated with this SPA, and to the long-term health of the protected features.

In terms of resources, Sule Skerry and Sule Stack are isolated islets 60km west of mainland Orkney, formed of Lewisian gneiss. Sule Skerry is larger, low-lying and vegetated whereas Sule Stack is a higher, bare rock stack with no vascular plants. The seaward extension of the SPA extends 2 km into the marine environment. The islets offer suitable breeding habitat for seabirds. The surrounding marine waters support a variety of natural resources, including molluscs, crustaceans, marine worms, pelagic and demersal fish species together with the birds and mammals that feed on them.

The natural resources present within the SPA give rise to a range of benefits to people. The seascapes and wildlife within the SPA provide opportunities for tourism and wildlife watching for those who wish to visit such remote islands.

The benefits that arise from the functions and natural resources of the MPA are typically small in the context of the whole of Scotland, but some are of greater importance for this MPA and the people that use it. There is potential for benefits to be enhanced by improving the quantity or quality (health) of the protected features themselves.

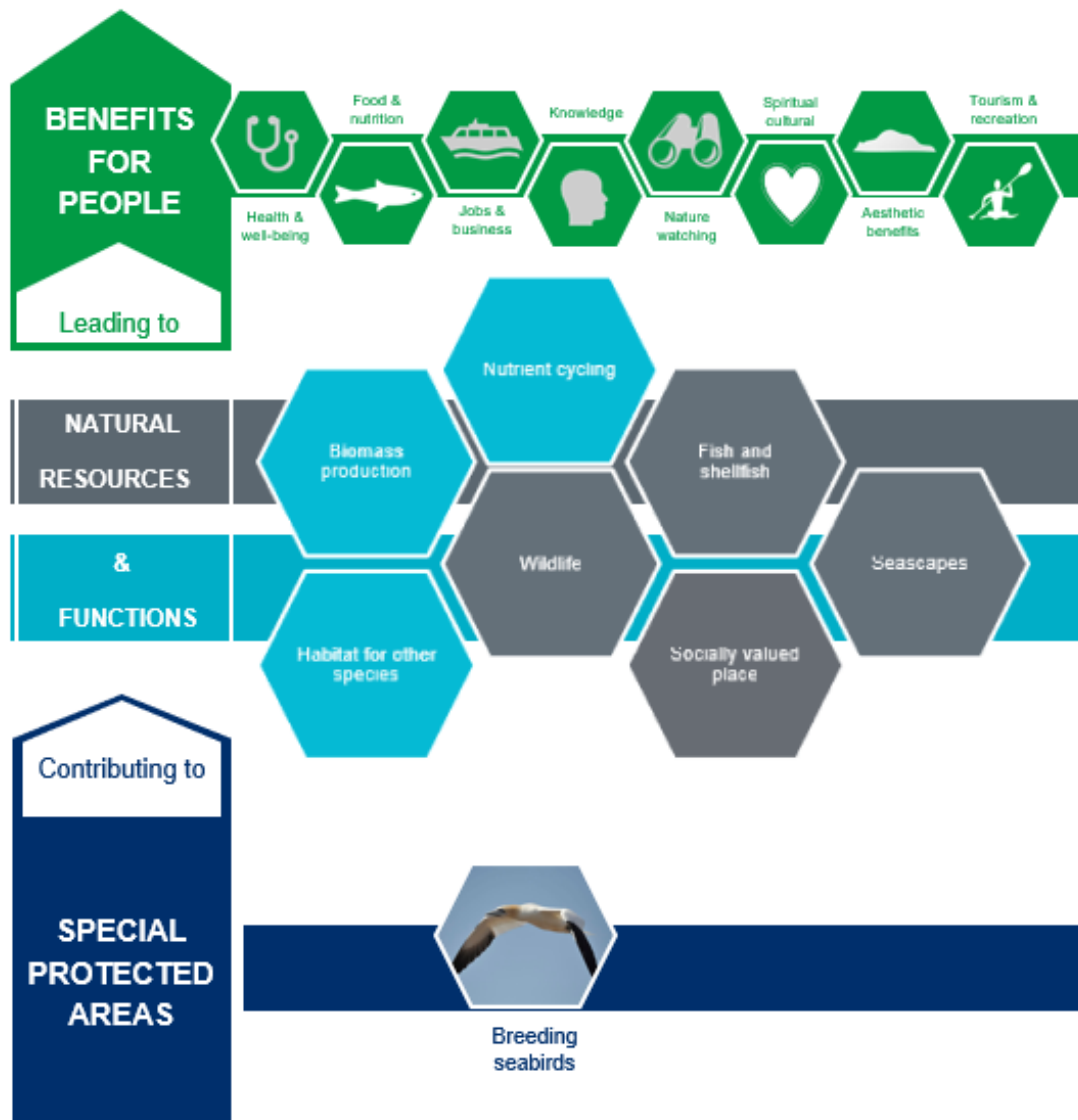


Figure 1. Benefits to people associated with protected features of the Sule Skerry and Sule Stack SPA.

2.4 Contribution to policy commitments

Managing the Sule Skerry and Sule Stack SPA to maintain the protected features in favourable condition, will ensure the continued provision of the benefits above as well as the SPA's contribution to:

- An ecologically coherent network of MPAs which are well managed under the OSPAR convention and national legislation.
- Achieving Favourable Conservation Status for the protected features in the Atlantic Biogeographic Region.
- Progress towards achieving Good Environmental Status in relation to maintaining biological diversity, and ensuring marine food web abundance and diversity.
- Making a significant contribution to the protection, enhancement and health of the marine area under the National Marine Plan.

- Restoring marine and coastal ecosystems and increasing the environmental status of our seas under the Scottish Biodiversity Strategy.
- Helping to adapt to climate change under The Scottish Climate Change Adaptation Programme.

3 Roles

This document provides advice for the Sule Skerry and Sule Stack SPA in relation to activities that may affect the protected features. More detailed advice can be provided to relevant authorities to inform their decision making as required. In doing this, our aim is to ensure the Conservation Objectives for the protected features are met.

The Conservation (Natural Habitats, &c.) Regulations 1994 (as amended in Scotland) (the “Habitats Regulations”) under Regulation 33(2), make special provisions for the protection of European marine sites, requiring SNH (now referred to as NatureScot), to advise other relevant authorities of the Conservation Objectives for a site, and also of the operations which may cause deterioration of the habitats or species, or disturbance of species protected in the SPA.

It is the role of the relevant and competent authorities¹ to ensure that the activities they regulate, permit or license do not hinder the achievement of the Conservation Objectives of the Sule Skerry and Sule Stack SPA. The management advice in this document is provided to assist authorities in managing the activities outlined in section 7 and undertaking Habitats Regulations Appraisals of plans and projects.

Stakeholders can provide additional evidence to support the development of management including local knowledge of the environment and of activities. This will contribute to the development of well-designed and effective management measures.

4 Protected features and status

The Sule Skerry and Sule Stack SPA has been selected to become part of the UK’s SPA network, contributing to Scotland’s MPA network, which in turn has been established to help conserve and recover a range of Scotland’s important marine habitats, wildlife, geology and landforms.

The protected features of the Sule Skerry and Sule Stack SPA are protected within the SPA throughout the year, irrespective of the season for which they qualified as a protected feature.

Table 1 provides a summary of the protected features within the MPA, their condition within the site (where known) based on the latest NatureScot [Site Condition Monitoring](#) assessment, and the broader conservation status of the protected features. Current trends for relevant seabird colonies can be found in JNCC (2021), and is based on trends derived from the Seabird Monitoring Programme (SMP) including where available, Seabird Counts

¹ A relevant authority is a body or authority that has a function in relation to land or waters within or adjacent to the site (Regulation 5) and include: a nature conservation body; a local authority; water undertakers; a navigation authority; a harbour authority; a lighthouse authority; a river purification board (SEPA); a district salmon fishery board; and a local fisheries committee. All relevant authorities are competent authorities. A competent authority is defined in Regulation 6 as “any Minister, government department, public or statutory undertaker, public body of any description or person holding a public office”. In the context of a plan or project, the competent authority is the authority with the power or duty to determine whether or not the proposal can proceed.

census data (Burnell *et al.* 2023). Where the SMP data is more recent than the SCM data this has been used to inform the feature condition at the site.

Table 1. Protected features and status for the Sule Skerry and Sule Stack SPA.

Feature condition refers to the condition of the protected feature at a site level. Broader conservation status is the overall conservation status of the feature within the UK and Europe. No assessment on the condition of the feature at the Marine Atlantic Biogeographic Region scale is available.

Protected Feature	Feature condition at site	Assessment year	Broader conservation status	
			UK ²	European region ³
Atlantic puffin (breeding)	Favourable, maintained	2018	Red	Endangered
Common guillemot (breeding)	Favourable, maintained	2015	Amber	Least Concern
European shag (breeding)	Unfavourable, declining	2018	Amber	Least Concern
European storm petrel (breeding)	Unfavourable, declining	2021	Amber	Least Concern
Leach's storm petrel (breeding)	Unfavourable, no change	2021	Red	Near Threatened
Northern gannet (breeding)	Favourable, maintained	2018	Amber	Least Concern

5 Setting Conservation Objectives

5.1 Background

Under Regulation 33(2) of the Habitats Regulations, NatureScot have responsibility for providing the Conservation Objectives for European marine sites in Scottish territorial waters. These site-level Conservation Objectives seek to define the contribution that each SPA should make to achieving Favourable Conservation Status for the protected features. They provide the framework for the setting of site conservation measures (management) and for the Habitats Regulations Appraisal of projects and plans.

Annex 1 sets out the Conservation Objectives for Sule Skerry and Sule Stack SPA.

5.2 Relationship between feature condition and Conservation Objectives

The Conservation Objectives seek to *maintain* protected SPA features where evidence exists that a feature is in favourable condition in the site, or where there is uncertainty

² Based on Birds of Conservation Concern 5 (BoCC5), for further details on definitions see Stanbury *et al.* 2024.

³ Based on BirdLife International, 2021

concerning the assessed condition of a feature (see section 4) but no reason to suspect deterioration in condition since designation. Where evidence exists that a feature is declining and/or damaged and therefore not in a favourable condition in the site, the Conservation Objectives will seek to *restore* the protected feature.

The following protected features are in favourable condition at Sule Skerry and Sule Stack SPA: puffin, guillemot, and gannet. Therefore, the Conservation Objectives seek to *maintain* this condition.

The following protected features are in unfavourable condition at Sule Skerry and Sule Stack SPA: shag, European storm petrel and Leach's storm petrel. Therefore, the Conservation Objectives seek to *restore* this condition.

Breeding shag are in unfavourable condition at Sule Skerry and Sule Stack SPA due to a decline of around 97% of the population since designation from 874 pairs (1994 citation) to 26 pairs (2018 count). The reasons for the decline are uncertain but off-colony factors such as reduction in prey in foraging areas are likely to be a contributing factor. Studies have demonstrated factors relating to prey availability (including sandeel and saithe) correlate with breeding success (e.g. Bustnes *et al.* 2013). Shags are also prone to large population crashes 'wrecks' as a result of extreme weather events. Gannets are known to have increased at this SPA but they do not appear to use areas that used to have more shag nests, so a reduction in breeding habitat is not considered to be a causal factor in their decline.

Breeding European storm petrel are in unfavourable condition at Sule Skerry and Sule Stack SPA due to a decline of around 96% from 5,000 pairs (1994 citation) to 177 pairs (2021 count). The reasons for the decline are uncertain but may be related to a reduction in prey availability causing changes in breeding distribution. The islands, as far as can be told, remain predator free and suitable nesting habitat is still present.

Breeding Leach's storm petrel have shown a complete reduction of number of pairs from 5 pairs at citation (1994). Playback surveys carried out in 2011, 2015 and 2018 have elicited no responses. There have therefore been no confirmed breeding attempts for this species at Sule Skerry and Sule Stack SPA. The reasons for the decline are uncertain but may be related to a reduction in prey causing changes in breeding distribution. The islands, as far as can be told, remain predator free and suitable nesting habitat is still present. Therefore, it is possible that this species would be able to re-establish at this site in the future.

5.3 Conservation priorities

On the rare occasion where the need to favour the management of one protected feature of a site over another, conservation priority will be given to the most important species/habitats to take action for and/or the most important or urgent measures to be taken.

For the Sule Skerry and Sule Stack SPA, European storm petrels and Leach's storm petrel are Annex 1 species and considered rare and vulnerable. The conservation requirements for Annex 1 species should take precedence over the regularly occurring migratory species (the remaining seabird species).

There are currently no apparent management conflicts between the protected features within the Sule Skerry and Sule Stack SPA. However, a future conflict may arise where maintaining suitable breeding habitat for puffin may impact on the expansion of the gannet population.

5.4 Overlapping Protected Areas

The following protected area boundaries overlap with, or are immediately adjacent to, the Sule Skerry and Sule Stack SPA:

- Sule Skerry Site of Special Scientific Interest (SSSI)

Conservation measures in the overlapping protected areas need to ensure the Conservation Objectives of all the sites are met. Conservation Objectives for the SPA would take precedence over the SSSI. There are no apparent management conflicts between the protected features of the SPA and the overlapping SSSI. Site information, including the Conservation Objectives for the sites, are available on [SiteLink](#).

6 Feature sensitivity

The following section provides an overview of the pressures associated with human activities that are most relevant to the protected features. Further information on feature sensitivity, will be made available on Marine Scotland's [Feature Activity Sensitivity Tool \(FeAST\)](#)⁴. The information in FeAST will reflect our current understanding of the interactions between activities, pressures and features. It highlights that activities can give rise to a range of pressures, which the protected features may be sensitive to. Our assessment of sensitivity is based on a feature's tolerance (response to change) and its ability to recover.

6.1 Atlantic puffin (breeding) and common guillemot (breeding)

Auks (including puffins and guillemots) may be prone to accidental bycatch in fishing nets particularly in surface gears (Zydelis *et al.* 2013). Depletion of prey resources either due to climate change or industry can also have effects on their populations (Mendel *et al.* 2008). These species are also susceptible to large scale mortality in major oil spills (Mendel *et al.* 2008), particularly during their flightless moult period. There is potential for impacts on auk species due to collision with artificial structures under water (Furness *et al.* 2012). Auks may also be susceptible to disease, including avian flu ([APHA](#)). These species may be displaced as a result of marine developments (Furness *et al.* 2013) and associated vessel activities (Furness, 2016). Guillemots show sensitivity to visual disturbance associated with vessels (Cook & Burton, 2010) and noise disturbance due to marine industry may also occur (Leopold & Camphuysen, 2009). As these are species that feed in the water column, they can be potentially affected by any increase in turbidity that would affect their ability to successfully forage for their prey (Cook & Burton, 2010). (See also *Sandeel sensitivity assessment in FeAST*).

6.2 European shag (breeding)

Shags are identified as among the most sensitive species to bycatch in surface gears, pelagic gears and at depth near the seabed in UK waters (Bradbury *et al.* 2017). Pollutants (e.g. polyisobutylene) (Camphuysen *et al.* 2010) and local oiling events (e.g. Heubeck, 1997), can also cause mortality. Severe weather such as storms may cause mortality 'wrecks' in shags. There is also potential for shag to be affected by collision with above water or under water marine developments (Furness *et al.* 2012). Shags are sensitive to vessel disturbance (Jarrett *et al.* 2018), which can affect their foraging behaviour at sea (Cook & Burton, 2010). Any pressure which would result in a reduction of prey for shags would also have the potential to affect their population. (See also *Sandeel sensitivity assessment in FeAST*).

⁴ <http://www.marine.scotland.gov.uk/feast/>

6.3 European storm petrel (breeding)

European storm-petrels are highly vulnerable to depredation by introduced mammalian predators (e.g. rats, cats, mink) at their breeding colonies (Mitchell & Newton 2004; Ruffino *et al.* 2009). There are recorded incidences of storm-petrel entanglement in fishing gear, most likely during hauling and setting of gillnet fishing gear (Žydelis *et al.* 2013) but sensitivity of European storm-petrel to potential bycatch in fisheries operating in UK waters is judged to be low (Bradbury *et al.* 2017). Human disturbance by trampling has reduced suitable breeding habitat for storm petrels which have caused a shift of habitat from burrows to rocky sites (Cadiou *et al.* 2010). Nestling mortality of storm petrels was significantly higher in areas exposed to high visitor pressure reducing colony productivity by <16% (Watson *et al.* 2014). There is a lack of information on pressures and threat in relation to storm petrel prey items, however should there be a pressure that would affect prey distribution or abundance this could have a consequential effect on the storm petrels ability to successfully breed or survive.

6.4 Leach's storm petrel (breeding)

Leach's petrels are highly vulnerable to depredation by introduced mammalian predators (e.g. rats, cats, foxes and mice) at their breeding colonies (Phillips *et al.* 1999; BirdLife International, 2019). Attraction to lights and flares and subsequent collisions with oil rigs pose a risk for this species (Hedd *et al.* 2018). Large oil spills represent a relatively unlikely but potentially very severe threat, although due to this bird's large range, it would be likely to affect only a small portion of the population. Human intrusions and disturbance of the nest site has shown that nest desertion can occur, particularly if disturbance is repeated and during the sensitive egg incubation period (BirdLife International, 2022).

6.5 Northern gannet (breeding)

Gannets are sensitive to collision with marine developments (Furness *et al.* 2013; ICES, 2015). Gannets are also identified as among the most vulnerable species to bycatch in both surface and pelagic gears in UK waters (Bradbury *et al.* 2017). They are also sensitive to entanglement in discarded fishing net and other plastic waste (Rodriguez *et al.* 2013). Gannets are vulnerable to diseases such as avian flu ([APHA](#)). Displacement as a result of marine development may also occur for gannets. This species may also be susceptible to marine litter ingestion or entrapment at their breeding colony (O'Hanlon *et al.* 2017). As these are a species that feed in the water column, they can be potentially affected by any increase in turbidity that would affect their ability to successfully forage for their prey (Cook & Burton, 2010).

7 Management

7.1 Conservation Measures

The following conservation measures are currently in place for the Sule Skerry and Sule Stack SPA:

- The Habitats Regulations require all plans or projects that may have an effect on the protected features of a SPA to be assessed against the Conservation Objectives for that site. This process is known as a Habitats Regulations Appraisal (HRA). An HRA is a statutory procedure that ensures the integrity of the site is maintained. It also provides an opportunity to consider appropriate mitigation that can reduce impacts, avoid adverse effects and permit plans or projects to proceed having taken full account of the protected features of an SPA.

Other relevant measures include:

- The SPA overlaps with Sule Skerry SSSI and management changes described on their lists of Operations Requiring Consent must have prior consent from NatureScot.
- Management agreement with Northern Lighthouse board on helicopter landings at the site, including seasonal restrictions.
- The 'Biosecurity for Scotland's seabird islands' project (2023 – 2026), builds on the Biosecurity for LIFE project (2018 – 2023), and aims to permanently remove the threat of introduction and establishment of invasive predators on seabird islands. The project will work with stakeholders to implement and maintain sustainable biosecurity measures including awareness raising, prevention, surveillance, and incursion response. Sule Skerry and Sule Stack are on the list of seabird islands this project is focusing work on.

7.2 Advice to support management

Table 2 provides NatureScot's advice on management for activities where we consider this may be necessary to achieve the Conservation Objectives for the protected features. The advice is focused on the activities that cause an effect (a pressure) that a feature is sensitive to. Pressures can be physical (e.g. abrasion of the seabed), chemical (e.g. introduction of pollutants) or biological (e.g. removal of prey resources). Different activities may cause the same pressure, e.g. fishing using bottom gears and aggregate dredging both cause abrasion which can damage the surface of the seabed.

Our advice takes a risk-based approach, i.e. we are focusing on providing advice where we believe there is a risk to achieving the Conservation Objectives. We have identified risks to achieving the Conservation Objectives where there is an overlap between protected features and activities associated with pressures that the features are sensitive to. We have provided management advice to support public authorities and others in managing these risks. Our advice is based on existing data and information on protected features and relevant activities, and our understanding of the relationships between the features and activities. We have identified a range of management advice:

- management to remove or avoid pressures;
- management to reduce or limit pressures; or
- no additional management required.

For our advice on fisheries management we have also stated where we think this should be 'considered.' This term is included to highlight that an issue exists, but circumstances mean that a specific recommendation for action cannot / or need not be made at this point. However, there is sufficient cause to make fishery managers aware of the issue and for them to consider if a fishery management measure may be helpful in achieving Conservation Objectives – particularly where there may be a synergy between the benefits of management actions for the fishery and the Conservation Objectives for the feature. The term 'recommended' highlights that an issue of fishery-feature interaction exists, there is a reasonable evidence base and a specific recommendation can be made/ justified.

New or other activities not identified within the table would need to be considered on a case-by-case basis.

We recognise that stakeholders can provide local environmental knowledge and more detailed information on activities, including in relation to intensity, frequency and methods. This additional information will help public authorities and others develop more specific management, focussed on the interaction between features and activities. If new information becomes available our management advice may be revised.

Table 2 describes the activities that are considered capable of affecting the protected features. Spatial data relating to the location and extent of the activities listed can be accessed on Marine Scotland's National Marine Plan Interactive⁵ (where available). Activities that are considered not likely to affect the protected features (other than insignificantly) are listed in Table 3.

7.3 Best Practice

In our management advice for activities in Table 2 we refer to the development, adoption or use of 'best practice' as a way of managing interactions between activities and the features. Best practice is taken to mean approaches or procedures that are developed and accepted by regulators and relevant stakeholders as being an effective way of dealing with an interaction between a habitat or species and the pressures created by an activity. Much of this best practice is already being implemented by sectors and regulators, e.g. pre-application discussions between developers and regulators, the Scottish Marine Wildlife Watching Code, Scottish Outdoor Access Code, and Technical Standards for Scottish Finfish Aquaculture.

⁵ <https://marinescotland.atkinsgeospatial.com/nmpi/>

Table 2. NatureScot’s advice to support management for Sule Skerry and Sule Stack SPA for activities which are considered capable of affecting the protected features.

The text under the ‘Advice to support management’ columns provides NatureScot’s management advice for the features in relation to the activities (further details about the terminology used are provided in section 7.2). Where a cell is coloured grey this indicates that management is already in place, this includes where there are existing regulatory requirements for new proposals. Cells are also coloured grey where it is considered there is no additional management required to achieve the Conservation Objectives. An * has been used to highlight those activities to which the advice under ‘*Boat use associated with both commercial and recreational activities*’ also applies. For some activities, the pressures associated with new proposals are considered unlikely to affect some the features either because these activities do not occur in the same locations as the features or the pressure is unlikely to be at levels that can affect the features (see also Table 3). In these cases, we have not provided advice however, where regulated; this does not exempt new plans or projects related to these activities undergoing a Habitats Regulations Appraisal (HRA).

Activities considered capable of affecting the protected features	Advice to support management	
	Gannet, guillemot, puffin, European storm petrel, Leach’s storm petrel	Shag
Aircraft (helicopter)	No additional management for helicopter landings associated with lighthouse maintenance – <i>existing management in place</i> .	
Aircraft (specifically unmanned aerial vehicles (UAV))	Reduce or limit pressures (disturbance) associated with UAVs within the SPA through effective mitigation such as: <ul style="list-style-type: none"> • following the Good Practice Advice for drones and wildlife • seasonal restrictions to avoid sensitive time periods for those protected features most susceptible to disturbance and/or; • spatial restrictions. 	
Boat use associated with both commercial (includes ship to ship) and recreational activities	Reduce or limit pressures (disturbance) associated with boat use during commercial and recreational activities through effective mitigation such as: <ul style="list-style-type: none"> • following the Scottish Marine Wildlife Watching Code (SMWWC); • seasonal restrictions to avoid sensitive time periods for those protected features most susceptible to disturbance and/or; • production of vessel management plans associated with activities that require a marine licence. This may include agreed routes and for boats, potential seasonal speed restrictions. 	
Fishing - demersal mobile/active gear (inc. mechanical trawls and benthic trawls)*	Whilst we have limited understanding about the extent of interactions between benthic fisheries and prey-supporting habitat within the site, a principal objective of the management of the relevant fisheries should be to ensure that the fishing activity does not cause such disturbance to the benthic habitats that it adversely affects the abundance and availability of prey.	

Activities considered capable of affecting the protected features	Advice to support management	
	Gannet, guillemot, puffin, European storm petrel, Leach's storm petrel	Shag
	<p>Reduce or limit pressures (removal of prey species and abrasion of prey-supporting habitat) associated with fishing that has the potential to damage seabed habitat (in particular, sandeel habitat, herring spawning grounds) should be considered.</p>	
Fishing – hydraulic dredge*	<p>Hydraulic dredging has the potential to cause significant disturbance to the sedimentary habitats that support the prey species of the protected features, particularly for sandeel and herring.</p> <p>A principal objective of the management of the relevant fisheries should be to ensure that the fishing activity does not cause such disturbance to the benthic habitats that it adversely affects the abundance and availability of prey.</p> <p>Remove or avoid pressures (removal of prey species and disturbance of prey-supporting habitat) associated with hydraulic fishing that has the potential to damage seabed habitat (in particular, sandeel habitat, herring spawning grounds) is recommended.</p>	
Fishing – static gear (drift nets and bottom set nets inc. fyke nets)*	<p>Remove or avoid pressures (entanglement) associated with the use of all static nets. Spatial exclusion of all static nets in areas identified as being important for auks (as identified from habitat and dive depth preferences) is recommended.</p>	<p>Remove or avoid pressures (entanglement) associated with the use of all static nets. Spatial exclusion of static nets in areas identified as being important for shag (as identified from habitat and dive depth preferences) is recommended.</p>
Fishing – pelagic*	<p>Remove or avoid pressures (removal of key prey species) associated with fishing for sandeels. There is no current targeted sandeel fishery within the SPA, this position should be retained.</p> <p>Pelagic fishing for herring/sprat may occur within or around the SPA. We recommend that a principal objective of the management of the fishery should be ensuring that the fishing activity does not prevent or disrupt the availability of prey species i.e. it should be considered as part of a broader ecosystem-based approach to management of this fishery.</p>	
Fishing – long-lining (not including jigging)*	<p>Our current understanding is that long-line fisheries are largely restricted to offshore waters. Site-specific measures for long-lining are not currently considered appropriate due to the scale of the fishery, and the wide-spread interaction with seabirds. However, there is evidence of seabird bycatch in long-line (not jigging) fisheries which we recommend require wider seas management measures.</p>	

Activities considered capable of affecting the protected features	Advice to support management	
	Gannet, guillemot, puffin, European storm petrel, Leach's storm petrel	Shag
Infrastructure – lighthouse maintenance, cables*	<p>Reduce or limit pressures (disturbance) associated with lighthouse maintenance activities.</p> <p>Reduce or limit pressures (disturbance, loss or damage to prey-supporting habitat) associated with new cable laying activities within or adjacent to the SPA.</p>	
Renewable energy (inc. wind)	<p>There are new marine renewable development proposals within connectivity to the Sule Skerry and Sule Stack SPA. Mitigation should focus on reducing or limiting pressures (disturbance, displacement, collision) on the protected features.</p>	
Scientific survey/research	<p>No additional management for current level of scientific survey or research, provided appropriate mitigations to minimise disturbance in the breeding season is in place.</p>	
Tourism & recreation (inc. angling, boating, diving, kayaking, walking)	<p>No additional management for existing recreational activities (includes angling, boating, diving, kayaking) providing the <u>Scottish Marine Wildlife Watching Code (SMWWC)</u> is followed by water-borne recreational users. The SMWWC highlights why birds are sensitive to disturbance and offers practical advice on how to avoid disturbance.</p> <p>No additional management for current levels of land-based tourism activities (walking), providing Scottish Outdoor Access Code is followed.</p> <p>Reduce or limit pressures (disturbance) where an increase by water-borne or land-based recreational activities demonstrates there is evidence of impacts at particular locations and/or if there is a major increase in intensity of these pursuits within the SPA. There would be potential for some zonation of measures across the site given that some protected features exhibit behavioural sensitivity to disturbance.</p>	
Wildlife tour operators*	<p>No additional management for existing wildlife tours providing the <u>Scottish Marine Wildlife Watching Code</u> is followed by Wildlife tour operators. The <u>Scottish Marine Wildlife Watching Code (SMWWC)</u> should be followed by water-borne recreational users and <u>Scottish Outdoor Access Code</u> is followed by land users.</p> <p>Reduce or limit pressures (disturbance) associated with an increase in wildlife tour operators if in the future there is evidence of impacts at particular locations and/or if there is an increase in intensity of these pursuits within the SPA. There would be potential for some zonation of measures across the site given that some protected features exhibit behavioural sensitivity to disturbance.</p>	

Table 3. Activities that are considered not likely to affect the protected features (other than insignificantly)⁶

Activity	Comments
Anchorage & moorings	Beyond pressures associated with the vessel traffic (covered in Table 2), we are not aware of any further pressures that have the potential to cause an adverse effect on the protected features.
Fishing – static gear – Creels (including lobster, crabs and Nephrops)	Fishing using creels is rare due to the remoteness of the SPA. Whilst there is the potential for entanglement for all the protected features, the occurrence is thought to be rare and therefore we consider this method poses a low risk to the protected features. Pressures associated with the vessel traffic from this pressure is covered under Table 2.
Fishing – line fishing (jigging)	Beyond pressures associated with the vessel movement (covered in Table 2), this activity is not expected to have the potential to cause an adverse effect on the protected features.

⁶ Only the specific examples of activities listed in the table have been excluded, rather than the broad activity types. New plans or projects will still need to be considered by the relevant competent authority (see Annex 1 for further details).

8 Research and survey

We recognise that there are still important gaps in our understanding and knowledge of the features of this site. We will identify research and survey projects to inform our understanding of these aspects. The knowledge gaps identified below are not a commitment to undertake this work. However, by highlighting these gaps we hope to inform future discussions with parties interested in undertaking research in this site and/or on these features, to help direct research and improve understanding of monitoring needs. The following list of research and survey needs is not prioritised and is not exhaustive.

- Establish adequate baseline information for supporting habitats and prey species and gain an understanding of which prey items are the most important at a local scale within the SPA for all protected features.
- Establish a marine bird monitoring programme that informs changes in species populations and distributions at a site and SPA network level, and which may include monitoring of the supporting prey, habitats and processes within the SPA.
- Further understanding required on the reasons behind the protected features' decline at the SPA. Productivity estimates at the SPA would be beneficial to help understand this decline.
- Further ecological studies of all protected features habitat preferences and use, and movements within the SPA.
- Better understanding on the implications of new offshore developments around the site on the protected features.
- Oceanographic studies, such as sea temperature and acidity levels, how these might change in future, and the effects of such changes on prey availability for birds.
- Studies of food availability and competition for food between different fish predators (e.g., birds, seals, dolphins, porpoises, whales) in relation to fisheries policy.
- Improved understanding of what supporting processes the key prey species are reliant upon within the SPA.
- Additional research is required to better understand the relationships between the impact of dredging and benthic trawling on supporting habitats, their ability to support suitable prey and any consequential effect this may have on protected features.
- Investigation is required to assess the potential impact of highly pathogenic avian flu on the protected features both within the SPA and at a wider scale, in particular for gannet.
- Research required on the evolution of the HPAI virus, exposure and survival rates in affected seabird species following the 2021-2023 HPAI outbreak.
- Evaluate the potential mitigations that could be put into place to limit disease spread should another outbreak of HPAI occur at this, or any other SPAs.
- An up-to-date systematic survey is required for the petrel protected features.
- What impact the increase in frequency and severity of storms (as predicted by climate change models) will have on the protected features, in particular for shags that are prone to 'wreck events', and the subsequent effects on their abundance or distribution.

Annex 1. Sule Skerry and Sule Stack SPA Conservation Objectives

The box below provides the high-level Conservation Objective statements for the Sule Skerry and Sule Stack SPA.

The full Conservation Objectives, which includes site-specific advice and information on the qualifying features that form part of this SPA, are provided in the tables that follow. The site-specific advice and information provides more detail in relation to each of the high level Conservation Objective statements for each feature, e.g. detail on the seasonal timings and what the supporting habitats and prey are for the qualifying features.

Information is also provided below on how minor changes to features should be considered and the influence of environmental change on features, particular in relation to climate change. Temporary impacts on the qualifying features resulting from plans or projects can only be permitted where there is certainty that the features will be able to quickly recover. Further details on the potential for each qualifying feature to recover are described in more detail in Annex 2 'Factors determining the potential of features to recover'.

A definition of the terms used is in the Glossary (Annex 3). The * denotes a qualifying feature that is an assemblage feature only.

Sule Skerry and Sule Stack SPA
Qualifying features: <ul style="list-style-type: none">• Atlantic puffin (<i>Fratercula arctica</i>)• Common guillemot (<i>Uria aalge</i>)*• European shag (<i>Gulosus aristotelis</i>)*• European storm petrel (<i>Hydrobates pelagicus</i>)• Leach's storm petrel (<i>Oceanodroma leucorhoa</i>)• Northern gannet (<i>Morus bassanus</i>)
Sule Skerry and Sule Stack also supports: <ul style="list-style-type: none">• Breeding seabird assemblage (includes all qualifying features)
<p>1. To ensure that the qualifying features of the Sule Skerry and Sule Stack SPA are in favourable condition and make an appropriate contribution to achieving Favourable Conservation Status.</p> <p>2. To ensure that the integrity of Sule Skerry and Sule Stack SPA is restored in the context of environmental changes by meeting objectives 2a, 2b and 2c for each qualifying feature:</p> <p>2a. The populations of the qualifying features are viable components of the Sule Skerry and Sule Stack SPA.</p> <p>2b. The distribution of the qualifying features is maintained throughout the site by avoiding significant disturbance of the species.</p> <p>2c. The supporting habitats and processes relevant to qualifying features and their prey resources are maintained, or where appropriate restored, at Sule Skerry and Sule Stack SPA.</p>

1. To ensure that the qualifying features of the Sule Skerry and Sule Stack SPA are in favourable condition and make an appropriate contribution to achieving Favourable Conservation Status.

Achieving FCS is defined in terms of the natural range and population of the species and the extent of habitat necessary for long-term maintenance of populations. There is an important role for all protected sites in the UK in defining, achieving and maintaining FCS for any habitat or species. Achieving FCS requires that each parameter is either stable or increasing, exceeds the relevant reference value and has good prospects of continuing to do so in the foreseeable future (JNCC, 2018). Favourable Conservation Status (FCS) is assessed across the Marine Atlantic Biogeographic Region with individual SPAs and SPA networks contributing to FCS.

The conservation status will be taken as 'favourable' when:

- population dynamics data on the species concerned indicate that it is maintaining itself on a long-term basis as a viable component of its natural habitats;
- the natural range of the species is neither being reduced nor is likely to be reduced for the foreseeable future;
- there is, and will probably continue to be, a sufficiently large habitat to maintain its populations on a long-term basis;

When carrying out appraisals of plans and projects against these Conservation Objectives, it is not necessary to understand the status of the qualifying features within each individual SPA in this Biogeographic Region. The focus of the appraisal should be to understand whether the integrity of the Sule Skerry and Sule Stack SPA would be maintained. If this is the case, then its contribution to FCS across the qualifying features' biogeographic range will be met. Similarly, when determining whether management measures may be required to ensure that the Conservation Objectives for this SPA are achieved, the focus should be on maintaining the contribution that it makes to FCS. Further advice on how these appraisals should be focussed in relation to maintaining site integrity is provided by Conservation Objective 2 (including parts a, b and c). If broader information (status, trends) on the qualifying features is available, it should be used to provide context to the site-based appraisal.

Note '*Appropriate*' within this part of the Conservation Objectives is included to indicate that the contribution to FCS varies from site to site, and feature to feature.

2. To ensure that the integrity of Sule Skerry and Sule Stack SPA is restored in the context of environmental changes by meeting objectives 2a, 2b and 2c for each qualifying feature:

This objective recognises that shag, European storm petrel and Leach's storm petrel are in unfavourable condition at the Sule Skerry and Sule Stack SPA and consequently site integrity is compromised.

For the Sule Skerry and Sule Stack SPA, when carrying out appraisals of plans or projects, the focus of the appraisal should be to understand the impact of the plan or project on site integrity. For qualifying features that are in favourable condition this means maintaining that condition. For those in unfavourable condition, it means ensuring that the plan or project does not prevent or reduce the potential for recovery. The expectation is not for the plan or project to restore site integrity. Should the plan or project compromise the ability of the qualifying features to recover (e.g. result in a further decline or accelerate the rate of decline, or prevent a recovery from occurring), then the Sule Skerry and Sule Stack SPA will not make an appropriate contribution to achieving FCS across the Atlantic Biogeographic Region. Similarly, when determining whether management measures are required to meet the Conservation Objectives, the focus is on ensuring the conditions are appropriate to support recovery and subsequently restore site integrity. Further advice on how these appraisals should be focussed in relation to site integrity is provided in 2a, b and c.

The breeding seabird assemblage is not considered further in the Conservation Objectives as each qualifying feature and 'named qualifier' of the assemblage are addressed individually.

Temporary impacts on these objectives resulting from plans or projects can only be permitted where there is a high degree of certainty that the features will be able to quickly recover from the impact and that impacts do not prevent the ability of unfavourable features to fully recover in the long-term.

Environmental changes

This Conservation Objective recognises that the qualifying features are part of a complex, dynamic and multi-dimensional marine environment. Marine birds depend on environmental conditions (for example water movement, up-wellings and prevailing weather) which vary over time and space. Consequently, marine bird species are exposed to a wide range of drivers of change. 'Environmental changes' for the purpose of these Conservation Objectives means any change to the qualifying features reflecting both natural population dynamics and also broader environmental changes (i.e. those related to climate change and environmental variability, management of which is beyond the scope of the SPA). The impact of human activities on the SPA that can be managed will not be considered as part of the broader context of environmental change (i.e. where required they should be managed).

Some site-level changes are natural and are not a direct result of human influences (e.g. population fluctuations arising from factors such as variable breeding success or weather conditions across the wintering range / shifts or changes in prey availability resulting from variability in environmental factors processes such as water temperature and movements). Changes in the qualifying features' distribution and use of the site, which are brought about by entirely natural drivers, directly or indirectly, are normally considered compatible with the SPA's Conservation Objectives.

There may also be historical human influences that have now ceased but have modified and continue to drive change within the site. It is also recognised that climate change pressures could affect the qualifying features within the site. These changes cannot be prevented, so the Conservation Objectives seek at a site level to take account of them and where possible, improve the qualifying species' resilience to environmental change when considering future plans or projects. The magnitude of the future impacts will depend on the nature, scale, duration and intensity of the activity and the qualifying features tolerance and ability to recover from such an impact.

Additionally, management of human activities at a wider scale (i.e. regional, Scotland or the area covered by an international agreement such as the OSPAR convention) may also affect the qualifying features associated with this site (either by making a positive contribution or having a negative impact). Wider scale impacts may affect the ability of the qualifying features to recover from site level changes, and therefore additional precaution over the impacts of any future human activities may be necessary.

An assessment of whether a change is natural or anthropogenic, or a combination of both, will need to be looked at on a case-by-case basis.

In relation to Sule Skerry and Sule Stack SPA and its qualifying features, the following effects of environmental change (climate change) are relevant. These effects should be taken into account when considering plans and projects as additional pressures may reduce the protected features' resilience to climate change, and conversely climate change impacts may start to hinder their ability to recover from human activities.

- **All qualifying features** - Under climate change, sea temperatures are predicted to increase, sea levels will rise and there could be increases in the frequency of stormy conditions. Increased levels of atmospheric CO₂ will also result in ocean acidification. Any of these factors could cause changes in bird abundance and distribution at the SPA due to changes in prey (species, availability and distribution).
- **For breeding seabirds** - climate change may result in effects at wintering grounds or in other parts of the overall breeding range which could have subsequent effects on their breeding population and distributions. For any burrow or hole nesting species (puffin, European storm petrel and Leach's storm petrel) an increase in rainfall due to climate change could also have adverse effects during the incubation period which may result in increased mortality of eggs or chicks due to a flooded burrow or hole. Climatic changes may also result in colonies being more prone to soil erosion which would in turn mean reduced habitat availability for burrowing species. In coastal breeding sites, increased flooding associated with storm tides may also cause nest site failures in breeding seabirds (Mendel *et al.* 2008). Increased storminess could also affect cliff-nesting seabirds, as eggs or chicks are more likely to be dislodged by waves, wind or rain.

Parent birds may also find foraging more difficult during storms, reducing their ability to maintain their own body condition whilst also incubating or feeding chicks.

- **Auks (*puffin, guillemot*):** Auks may be vulnerable to extreme weather events, particularly winter storms, which have been linked to adult mortality and winter 'wreck' events (BirdLife International, 2022). Decreased survival rates in these species have been linked to increased sea temperatures and stronger winds (Votier *et al.* 2005; 2008; Sandvik *et al.* 2005).
- **Shag:** Shags are susceptible to increased storminess and extreme weather which can lead to mass mortality events, particularly in the winter (Bustnes *et al.* 2013).
- **European storm petrel, Leach's storm petrel:** Studies on Leach's storm petrels demonstrated that breeding success was lower in years of higher global mean temperature (Mauck *et al.* 2018). The potential impacts of climate change on European storm-petrel in the UK are unclear (Pearce-Higgins *et al.* 2011). Other storm petrel species have shown timing of breeding is associated with food supply, which in turn is associated with climate conditions (Drummond & Leonard, 2009; Bedolla-Guzmán *et al.* 2017).
- **Gannet:** Gannets can travel great distances from their nest site to forage and are able to exploit a wide range of prey. Hence, they may have greater potential than some other seabird species to adapt to climate change. However, in the North West Atlantic, a century-long population trend of northern gannets correlated with warming surface water conditions and increased mackerel availability on a decadal scale, indicating that climate change effects on diet is likely for this species (Montevecchi & Myers, 1997).

2a. The populations of the qualifying features are viable components of the Sule Skerry and Sule Stack SPA.

This objective seeks to specifically protect the qualifying features from **significant** mortality, injury or removal that can lead to a long-term decline of the feature(s) within the site. It protects the features from significant risk of incidental killing and injury from activities both within and outwith the site. Impacts and effects are considered 'significant' where they could result in a permanent reduction or continued decline in the population and consequently, reduction in the contribution the Sule Skerry and Sule Stack SPA makes to the maintenance of the qualifying features in their natural range in the UK. It should be ensured that the qualifying features are protected from anthropogenic pressures that could lead to a significant long-term decline in numbers using the site, such that recovery cannot be expected. Ensuring the capacity of the Sule Skerry and Sule Stack SPA to support all the essential behaviours and activities required to support viable populations of the qualifying features in the relevant season(s) are addressed by Conservation Objectives 2b and 2c.

At a site level, the population is considered to be viable if the species can carry out their life cycle functions relevant to the season(s) they are present, irrespective of dependencies such as immigration. For the qualifying features, the viability of the species within the Sule Skerry and Sule Stack SPA is intrinsically linked to their ability to access and use foraging habitat in areas of functionally linked sea, within foraging range, outwith the site, in addition to the ability of the site to support breeding adult survival and chick-rearing.

When assessing the effects of any plan or project consideration should also be given to whether impacts outwith the SPA could affect achievement of this Conservation Objective. This Conservation Objective is considered to be met if the conditions to support all the species' essential behaviours and activities are in place. This includes:

- avoiding effects within and outwith the site that could prevent or reduce the ability of the populations of qualifying features to recover.
- avoiding effects within and outwith the site that could lead to a permanent reduction in the populations of qualifying features through mortality, injury, or impacts caused by disturbance, displacement, barrier effects or reduction in mobile prey resources.
- maintaining the species' ability to use all areas of importance within the site (to be considered under Conservation Objective 2b)
- maintaining access to, and availability of, supporting habitats and prey within the site (to be considered under Conservation Objective 2c).

Where known, the populations of the qualifying features should be maintained at or above site reference populations, as detailed below. The site reference population may be revised from the baseline at designation where a) there is evidence to show that a population's size has significantly changed as a result of natural factors or management measures and has been stable at or above a new level over a considerable period (generally equivalent to at least one generation length for the given species) and/or b) to reflect any wider strategic objectives for the species (e.g. national or international species action plan). Where there is evidence to show that a qualifying feature has historically been more abundant than the stated minimum target and current level, the ongoing capacity of the site to accommodate the feature at such higher levels in future should also be taken into account.

All qualifying features are protected throughout the whole site, throughout the year. This means that irrespective of the season for which they are designated, the qualifying features are protected during both their breeding and non-breeding seasons when using the SPA.

Temporary short-term changes in the populations due to human activity may be considered not to compromise the Conservation Objectives within the site provided it can be demonstrated that the populations of any affected qualifying features can fully recover. Factors limiting the recovery of the qualifying features include: the average generation times, population growth rates, availability of prey and the timing and duration of the activity around vulnerable stages of their life cycles such as during moulting or chick-rearing period.

Direct mortality can arise from: collision (above and underwater); entanglement (incidental bycatch); predation, disease, flooding events, and pollution. Indirect mortality can arise from loss of or damage to prey or prey-supporting habitats (e.g. through harvesting; physical removal of or damage to seabed; nutrient enrichment; changes to water temperature, salinity, or flows; introduction of invasive non-native species (INNS); pollution). Indirect mortality can arise from reduced ability to capture or access prey arising from e.g. increased water turbidity or displacement from foraging areas.

The site-specific information includes a site reference population that is considered the most appropriate for assessments of plans and projects. Where this is based on the citation population at classification or recent surveys, the site reference population is rounded using standard procedures (Stroud *et al.* 2001).

Feature	Site-specific advice	Site-specific information
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Atlantic puffin	<p>Maintain the breeding population of puffin at a stable or increasing trend relative to the current site reference population.</p> <p>and</p> <p>Ensure puffin are not at significant risk from injury or mortality.</p> <p>and</p> <p>Ensure puffins can move safely between the site and important areas of functionally linked sea outwith the site.</p>	<p>The site reference population for puffins at the Sule Skerry and Sule Stack SPA is 47,000 pairs (1994 citation). The last site visit count in 2018 showed the numbers have remained largely stable, being around 47,700 pairs. Puffin populations have been generally increasing within the UK (long-term trend between 1969-2000) (Harris & Wanless, 2004). However, recent trends show that puffins have decreased by 15% since Seabird 2000 (1998-2002), and in Scotland they have decreased by 21% (Burnell <i>et al.</i>, 2023).</p> <p>The long-term maintenance of puffins at the Sule Skerry and Sule Stack SPA is intrinsically linked to their ability to access and use habitats in areas of functionally linked sea outwith the SPA. When assessing the effects of any plan or project consideration should therefore also be given to whether impacts on the population whilst outwith the SPA could affect achievement of this Conservation Objective.</p>
Common guillemot	<p>Maintain the breeding population of guillemot at a stable or increasing trend relative to the current site reference population.</p> <p>and</p>	<p>The site reference population for guillemots at the Sule Skerry and Sule Stack SPA is 6,300 individuals (1994 citation). The latest count data available for this SPA shows this number has increased to around 10,000 individuals (2018 count). Guillemot populations in the UK decreased by 8% since Seabird 2000 (1998-2002) and 31% in Scotland (Burnell <i>et al.</i>, 2023).</p> <p>The long-term maintenance of common guillemot in Sule Skerry and Sule Stack SPA is intrinsically linked to their ability to access and use habitats in areas of functionally linked sea outwith the SPA. When assessing the effects of any plan or project consideration should therefore also be given to whether impacts on the population whilst outwith the SPA could affect achievement of this Conservation Objective.</p>

	<p>Ensure guillemots are not at significant risk from injury or mortality.</p> <p>and</p> <p>Ensure guillemots can move safely between the site and important areas of functionally linked sea outwith the site.</p>	
European storm petrel	<p>Ensure European storm petrels are not at significant risk from injury or mortality.</p> <p>And</p> <p>Ensure European storm petrels can move safely between the site and important areas of functionally linked sea outwith the site.</p>	<p>There is no site reference population for European storm petrels at Sule Skerry and Sule Stack SPA due to the uncertainty in the population estimate given at citation. At the time of site designation there was 500-5000 pairs estimated, which exceeded what was required for site selection. Surveys of this species were carried out in 2011, 2015 and 2018. Playback elucidated responses in burrows and several active nests were confirmed. No systematic attempt was made to survey the population, but the survey group stated the number of burrows were less than the citation population. There is insufficient information on European storm petrels to properly assess UK trends, though there is a suggestion from limited information that between 1999-2011 their populations may have increased (Bolton <i>et al.</i> 2010; JNCC, 2021). From the most recent analysis, trends suggest that European storm petrels in the UK have increased by 41% since Seabird 2000 (1998-2002) and 48% in Scotland (Burnell <i>et al.</i>, 2023)</p> <p>The long-term recovery of European storm petrel in Sule Skerry and Sule Stack SPA is intrinsically linked to their ability to access and use habitats in areas of functionally linked sea outwith the SPA. When assessing the effects of any plan or project consideration should therefore also be given to whether impacts on the population whilst outwith the SPA could affect achievement of this Conservation Objective.</p>
European shag	<p>Ensure the breeding population of shags have the ability to</p>	<p>The site reference population for breeding shags at the Sule Skerry and Sule Stack SPA is 870 pairs (1994 citation). This species has steeply declined at the site to only 26 pairs at the latest count (2018). Shags have experienced a 20% decrease in their breeding populations within the UK since</p>

	<p>recover to the site reference population.</p> <p>and</p> <p>Ensure shags are not at significant risk from injury or mortality.</p> <p>and</p> <p>Ensure shags can move safely between the site and important areas of functionally linked sea outwith the sites.</p>	<p>Seabird 2000 (1998-2002) and within Scotland their populations have decreased by 22% (Burnell <i>et al.</i>, 2023).</p> <p>The reasons for the decline of shag are uncertain but are potentially associated with poor weather conditions (shags are prone to large population crashes ‘wrecks’ as a result of extreme weather events) and factors such as reduction in prey in foraging areas. Gannets are known to have increased at this SPA but they do not appear to use areas that used to have more shag nests, so a reduction in breeding habitat is not considered to be a causal factor in their decline. Research is required to fully understand the reasons behind the steep decline at this SPA and whether there is anything that can be done to reverse it.</p> <p>The long-term recovery of shags at the Sule Skerry and Sule Stack SPA is also intrinsically linked to their ability to access and use habitats in areas of functionally linked sea outwith the SPA. When assessing the effects of any plan or project consideration should therefore also be given to whether impacts on the population whilst outwith the SPA could affect achievement of this Conservation Objective.</p>
Leach’s storm petrel	<p>Ensure the breeding population of Leach’s storm petrel have the ability to recover to the site reference population.</p> <p>and</p> <p>Ensure breeding Leach’s storm petrels are not at significant risk from injury or mortality.</p> <p>and</p>	<p>The site reference population for Leach’s storm petrels at the Sule Skerry and Sule Stack is 5 pairs (1994 citation). Playback surveys carried out in 2011, 2015 and 2018 have elicited no responses from Leach’s petrels. There have therefore been no confirmed breeding attempts for this species at Sule Skerry and Sule Stack SPA. There is insufficient information on Leach’s storm petrels to assess a long-term UK trend, but from those colonies where data is available it suggests that their populations are in decline (JNCC, 2021). Latest analysis reports that Leach’s storm petrel have decreased by 79% in the UK and Scotland since Seabird 2000 (1998-2002) (Burnell <i>et al.</i>, 2023).</p> <p>Reasons for the decline in Leach’s petrels at the Sule Skerry and Sule Stack are unclear. However, it seems likely that changes in prey availability within the marine environment is a major contributing factor. The islands, as far as can be told, remain predator free and suitable nesting habitat is still present. Therefore it is possible that this species would be able to re-establish at this site in the future. Further work is required to ascertain why they no longer breed at this SPA.</p> <p>The long-term recovery of Leach’s petrels in Sule Skerry and Sule Stack SPA is intrinsically linked to their ability to access and use habitats in areas of functionally linked sea outwith the SPA. When</p>

	<p>Ensure Leach's storm petrels can move safely between the site and important areas of functionally linked sea outwith the site.</p>	<p>assessing the effects of any plan or project consideration should therefore also be given to whether impacts on the population whilst outwith the SPA could affect achievement of this Conservation Objective.</p>
<p>Northern gannet</p>	<p>Maintain the breeding population of gannets at a stable or increasing trend relative to the current site reference population.</p> <p>and</p> <p>Ensure breeding gannets are not at significant risk from injury or mortality.</p> <p>and</p> <p>Ensure gannets can move safely between the site and important areas of functionally linked sea outwith the site.</p>	<p>The site reference population for gannets at the Sule Skerry and Sule Stack SPA is 4900 pairs (1994 count from Murray & Wanless, 1997). This differs from the citation population due to a suspected over-estimation in the original survey carried out at the time of citation. The latest complete count noted an increase to around 6400 pairs (2013 count, combined Sule Skerry (1870) and Sule Stack (4550)). In 2018 Sule Skerry was counted and had increased to around 4500 pairs (Harris <i>et al.</i> 2019). Gannets in the UK have increased by 38% since the last gannet census (2003-2005), and have increased by 40% in Scotland in the same period. In summers of 2021 and 2022, gannet populations were affected by avian flu, monitoring in 2023 indicated a decline of 22% in Scotland due to avian flu (Tremlett <i>et al.</i>, 2024).</p> <p>The long-term maintenance of gannets at the Sule Skerry and Sule Stack SPA is intrinsically linked to their ability to access and use habitats in areas of functionally linked sea outwith the SPA. When assessing the effects of any plan or project consideration should therefore also be given to whether impacts on the population whilst outwith the SPA could affect achievement of this Conservation Objective.</p>

2b. The distribution of the qualifying features is maintained throughout the site by avoiding significant disturbance of the species.

This objective seeks to ensure that the qualifying features can continue to use and access all areas within the Sule Skerry and Sule Stack SPA used for feeding, moulting, roosting, loafing, shelter and other maintenance activities. Changes in the distribution of the qualifying features are most likely to be brought about through disturbance, therefore this objective relates to avoiding significant disturbance. Changes in distribution may also result from shifts in prey distributions; this is considered under objective 2c. Disturbance associated with human activity may take a variety of forms including: noise, light, sound, vibration, trampling, presence of people, animals and structures, as well as displacement and barrier effects on the species. The type of disturbance, its duration and the area over which the qualifying features are likely to be affected are important considerations in any appraisal of disturbance.

Disturbance can, for example, result in changes to feeding or roosting behaviour, increased energy expenditure due to increased time spent moving to avoid stressors, abandonment of nest sites and desertion of supporting habitat (both within or outside the protected area where appropriate). This may affect successful chick rearing in the breeding season, feeding and/or roosting, and/or may reduce the availability of suitable habitat as birds are displaced and their distribution within the site contracts.

'Significant disturbance' should be interpreted to mean disturbance that affects the integrity of the site through alteration of the distribution of the qualifying features such that recovery cannot be expected or effects can be considered long term. It is expected that significant disturbance will lead to more than a transient effect on the distribution of the qualifying features. It may result in the following types of effect:

- Contributes to the long-term decline in the use of the site by the qualifying features.
- Changes to the distribution of the qualifying features on a continuing or sustained basis.
- Changes to the qualifying features behaviour such that it reduces the ability of the species to survive, breed or rear their young.

There are two main ways in which the qualifying features' continued access to suitable resources could be restricted and distribution affected and this is where assessments should be focussed:

1. Large scale physical barriers, or;
2. Significant disturbance which alters their distribution within the site or disrupts important behaviours.

Temporary short-term disturbances due to human activity may be considered not to compromise the Conservation Objectives within the site provided it can be demonstrated that the population can fully recover with a high degree of certainty. Factors limiting the recovery of the qualifying features include the timing, frequency and duration of the activity around vulnerable stages of their life cycle such as during moulting or chick-feeding period.

All qualifying features are protected throughout the whole site, throughout the year. We anticipate that some locations within the Sule Skerry and Sule Stack SPA will be more, or less, important than others for individual species. Distributions within the site may also change over time in response to a range of abiotic and biotic factors (e.g. changes in abundance or quality of prey resources at particular locations, numbers

of each qualifying feature within the site as a whole, seasonal fluctuations or trends in prevailing weather conditions etc.). In some cases detailed bespoke surveys of bird numbers and distributions, to determine qualifying features' current usage of particular locations within a proposals area of influence, may be required to complete the necessary assessments.

Direct displacement/redistribution of the qualifying features can arise from: barriers to movement to and between foraging and roosting locations; and visual disturbance (e.g. associated with vessel movements or human presence). Indirect displacement/redistribution can arise from loss of or damage to prey or prey-supporting habitats (e.g. through harvesting; physical removal of or damage to seabed; nutrient enrichment; changes to water temperature, salinity, or flows; introduction of INNS; pollution (e.g. light, noise, chemical)).

For all qualifying features: Disturbance to foraging birds may reduce the time spent feeding or cause them to move to different areas that are less energetically profitable. Disturbance that creates an avoidance response or disrupts/reduces incubation, chick-rearing, foraging or resting behaviour can also put increased energetic demands on birds during an already energetically expensive season. Ensuring safe movement within and between the breeding colony and those areas used for foraging, roosting and other maintenance behaviours (see also 2c) is important to meet the energetic demands required to achieve or maintain body condition needed to support migration and successful breeding and for subsequent winter survival. Barriers to movement may reduce access to preferred foraging habitat and cause sub-optimal foraging.

Feature	Site-specific advice	Site-specific information
Atlantic puffin	<p>Ensure puffins continue to have access to and can utilise all optimal habitats suitable for all relevant aspects of their life cycle associated with the site.</p> <p>and</p> <p>Avoid significant disturbance to puffins and ensure individuals can move safely between these areas within the site.</p>	<p>Puffins are migratory species which remain offshore during the non-breeding period and move from their breeding grounds such as the Sule Skerry and Sule Stack SPA and wintering grounds potentially near the Azores, Canary Islands, north-west Africa and the western Mediterranean. They are present at the Sule Skerry and Sule Stack SPA from mid-March until end of August. In some exceptional years adults may still be feeding chicks in September. Puffins have their flightless moult period from the beginning of February to mid-March.</p> <p>Puffins have their highest densities within the SPA on Sule Skerry. Puffins will nest underground in burrows, often dug into grassy maritime slopes or will nest amongst boulder scree or cracks in sea cliffs where grassy habitat is sparse. During the fledgling period young will leave their burrow at night and make their way to the sea.</p> <p>Puffins will use the inshore waters of the SPA to roost, forage and for other maintenance activities. Foraging is largely restricted to dive depths of up to 70m, although their average dive depth is around 35m (Harris & Wanless 2011; Ropert-Coudert <i>et al.</i> 2018). Their mean maximum foraging range in the breeding period is 137.1 +/- 128.3km, though they can range up to 383km (Woodward <i>et al.</i> 2019). However, when feeding chicks birds generally forage within 10km of their colony.</p>

		In spring, puffins assemble close inshore in large rafts on the water pre-breeding, where courtship takes place (Snow & Perrins, 1998). Puffins will often roost on the sea at night and will forage early in the morning, returning to their chicks for provisioning (Boag & Alexander, 1998).
Common guillemot	<p>Ensure guillemots continue to have access to and can utilise all optimal habitats suitable for all relevant aspects of their life cycle associated with the site.</p> <p>and</p> <p>Avoid significant disturbance to guillemots and ensure individuals can move safely between these areas within the site.</p>	<p>Guillemots are present in the Sule Skerry and Sule Stack SPA throughout the year. Guillemots' breeding season is from April until mid-August. From the beginning of August to mid-October they will remain on the waters by the Sule Skerry and Sule Stack SPA, where adults will undergo a flightless moult period. Guillemots will attend their breeding sites surrounding the Sule Skerry and Sule Stack SPA frequently during the non-breeding period, particularly from February onwards.</p> <p>Guillemots will nest on bare cliff ledges, and flat boulders at the Sule Skerry and Sule Stack SPA in dense colonies. The majority of the guillemots at this SPA are found at Sule Skerry. They use areas close to the coast as well as offshore waters in which to forage, rest, and carry out other maintenance activities. In the breeding period, the foraging range of guillemot has a mean maximum of 73.2 ± 80.5 km, with a maximum range of 338km (Woodward <i>et al.</i> 2019). Guillemots forage both at the seabed (demersal) and within the water column (pelagic), primarily during daylight hours (Wakefield <i>et al.</i> 2017). They have an average dive depth of 42m, though can forage up to 200m depth (Ropert-Coudert <i>et al.</i> 2018).</p> <p>Guillemots may fly in small groups and will often form large rafts on the sea close in the colony before heading out on a foraging trip. When ready to fledge the chick will leave the nest site and joins the male of the pair on the sea, where they travel further out to sea together and remain close for around two months (Harris & Wanless, 2003).</p>
European storm petrel	<p>Ensure European storm petrels continue to have access to and can utilise all optimal habitats suitable for all relevant aspects of their life cycle associated with the site.</p> <p>and</p> <p>Avoid significant disturbance to European storm petrels and ensure</p>	<p>European storm petrels are a migratory species which migrate from their Scottish breeding colonies to more southerly locations for their winter especially off west Africa, South Africa. They are present at Sule Skerry and Sule Stack SPA from mid-May to end of October. Outside of the breeding season they are strictly oceanic.</p> <p>European storm petrels nest mainly in burrows or crevices on Sule Skerry, and they will generally only return to their burrow during darkness. The foraging range of European storm-petrel is estimated as being around 336km (Woodward <i>et al.</i> 2019). Storm petrels forage during the day over deep waters but are also present in shallower water over the shelf. They may also move closer inshore to their breeding colonies at night time.</p>

	<p>individuals can move safely between these areas within the site.</p>	
European shag	<p>Ensure shags continue to have access to and can utilise all optimal habitats suitable for all relevant aspects of their life cycle associated with the site.</p> <p>and</p> <p>Avoid significant disturbance to shags and ensure individuals can move safely between these areas within the site.</p>	<p>Shags are a resident UK species and are present within the Sule Skerry and Sule Stack SPA throughout the year. Their main breeding period is from March to September.</p> <p>Within the Sule Skerry and Sule Stack SPA the majority of shags nest on ledges on the low cliffs fringing Sule Skerry. They will use nearshore and further offshore waters in which to forage. Shags forage by day, tending not to feed far from land. In the breeding season, shags mean maximum foraging distance is 13.2+/-10.5km, though a maximum foraging distance of 46km has been noted (Woodward <i>et al.</i> 2019).</p> <p>Shags are benthic feeding piscivores. As such, foraging areas tend to coincide with areas of sandy benthic sediment, and occur where depth is less than 80 m (Daunt <i>et al.</i> 2015). Shags mostly dive to 10-40m, though dives of more than 50m have been recorded (Daunt <i>et al.</i> 2015; Watanuki <i>et al.</i> 2008). Shags also use seaweed as a foraging habitat (Goodship & Furness, 2018).</p>
Leach's storm petrel	<p>Ensure Leach's storm petrel continue to have access to and can utilise all optimal habitats suitable for all relevant aspects of their life cycle associated with the site.</p> <p>and</p> <p>Avoid significant disturbance to Leach's storm petrel and ensure individuals can move safely between these areas within the site.</p>	<p>Leach's storm petrel are a migratory species which migrate from their Scottish breeding colonies to more tropical waters, especially off west Africa, South Africa and some reaching the Indian Ocean. Their breeding period is from May-mid-October.</p> <p>Leach's storm petrels nest in burrows or amongst crevices in rock, boulders or walls and will only return to land during the night. At Sule Skerry and Sule Stack SPA Leach's petrels have been caught at night in mist nests on Sule Skerry. These captures have included birds ringed from other colonies, including those from Scotland and Norway. Leach's petrels are highly pelagic and forage during the day in deep (more than 1,950m) and relatively unproductive waters over and beyond continental slopes, on average 400-830km from their colonies (Pollet <i>et al.</i> 2014; Hedd <i>et al.</i> 2018). This species has a mean foraging range of 657km (Woodward <i>et al.</i> 2019).</p>

<p>Northern gannet</p>	<p>Ensure gannets continue to have access to and can utilise all optimal habitats suitable for all relevant aspects of their life cycle associated with the site.</p> <p>and</p> <p>Avoid significant disturbance to gannets and ensure individuals can move safely between these areas within the site.</p>	<p>Gannets breeding at the Sule Skerry and Sule Stack SPA will be present from mid-February until the end of September. After their breeding period they will then depart for their wintering areas in the North Sea or off West Africa. Gannets nest in dense colonies on the cliffs within the Sule Skerry and Sule Stack SPA and will construct nests from seaweed, plants, earth and debris from the sea (Nelson, 2010).</p> <p>The gannet colony within this SPA was previously concentrated on Sule Stack, however in the most recent decade Sule Skerry has now been colonised by the gannets, including being present on the west side of Stack Geo. where breeding habitat is still available for them. Ringing recoveries indicate that at least some of the birds at Sule Skerry originate from the nearby Sule Stack (Blackburn, 2014; Harris <i>et al.</i> 2019). Gannets use areas close to the coast as well as offshore waters in which to forage, rest, and carry out other maintenance activities. Gannets will plunge dive to around 11m, but can then carry out wing-propelled pursuit to deeper depths of around 24m. Gannets have a mean maximum foraging range of 315.2+/- 194.2 km during the breeding period, but the maximum foraging distance recorded can be over 700km (Woodward <i>et al.</i> 2019).</p>
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2c. The supporting habitats and processes relevant to qualifying features and their prey resources are maintained, or where appropriate restored, at Sule Skerry and Sule Stack SPA.

This objective seeks to maintain the current extent, quality and distribution of supporting habitats within the site as well as ensure a sufficient food supply within the site. It also recognises however, that the populations of breeding European shag and Leach’s petrel at the Sule Skerry and Sule Stack SPA are in unfavourable condition and that this may, in part, be due factors within the SPA.

The qualifying features require suitable habitat for breeding, shelter, roosting, foraging, loafing, moulting and other maintenance activities. The variety, quality, abundance and availability of food resources on which the qualifying features depend is important for ensuring adult fitness, survival and breeding success. The supply of food resources is supported by environmental processes.

In the terrestrial environment, supporting habitats refer to the characteristics of the vegetation and rock, relevant to their use by the qualifying features. Supporting processes relates to wider processes such as factors affecting coastal erosion, factors affecting vegetation formation, which will influence the habitat types available for the qualifying features.

In the marine environment, supporting habitats refer to the characteristics of the seabed and water column relevant to their use by the qualifying features. Supporting processes relates to wider oceanographic processes such as up-wellings, tidal flows, hydrological movements which may be necessary for the habitat, and thus affects nutrient cycling and prey distribution.

Temporary short-term changes in supporting habitat and/or food resources due to human activity may be considered not to compromise the Conservation Objectives within the site provided it can be demonstrated with a high degree of certainty that the populations of any affected qualifying features can fully recover. The species-specific information includes a summary of available information on food resources and where known, the distribution of the key supporting habitats and associated processes within the Sule Skerry and Sule Stack SPA.

The overall water body condition status relevant to the Sule Skerry and Sule Stack SPA was assessed as “High” in 2020⁷. This assessment includes consideration of water chemistry, pollutants, the physical condition of the water body, plant and animal communities, including plankton, and the risk from invasive non-native species.

There is currently insufficient information to support quantitative advice on the environmental processes associated with the supporting habitats and prey of the qualifying features at the Sule Skerry and Sule Stack SPA.

Feature	Site-specific advice	Site-specific information
Atlantic puffin	<p>Maintain the extent and distribution of the supporting habitats for puffins within the site.</p> <p>and</p> <p>Maintain the variety and abundance of food resources and the condition of supporting habitats and associated processes.</p> <p>and</p> <p>Existing water quality should be maintained any increase in nutrients, turbidity or contaminants</p>	<p>Puffins use grassy maritime slopes, boulder scree or cracks in sea cliffs and rocky slopes for nesting. Feathers, grass, other vegetation, or seaweed may be taken into the burrow as burrow lining (Harris & Wanless, 2011). Puffins will use both inshore and offshore pelagic and shelf-waters in which to forage, roost and for other maintenance activities. Foraging is largely restricted to dive depths of up to 70m (Harris & Wanless, 2011).</p> <p>Puffins’ diet will consist of a number of different pelagic and demersal fish, including: sandeels, clupeids, gadoids, sprat, whiting, saithe, haddock, with typical fish sizes being up to 20cm (Harris & Wanless, 2011). Within UK waters, puffins rely heavily on sandeels as prey with between 60 and 90% of their diet reported to be sandeel throughout the North Sea (Furness, 2002). Breeding success of puffins has been shown to correlate with availability of sandeels (Macdonald <i>et al.</i> 2015). Puffins can also prey on planktonic crustaceans, including <i>Calanus</i> copepods, euphausiids amphipods such as <i>Parathemisto libellula</i>; pteropod molluscs; the squid <i>Illex illecebrosus</i>; and polychaete worms (Harris & Wanless, 2011).</p> <p>Key prey supporting habitats are those suitable for supporting sandeels. Sandeel, spend much of their life buried in sand on the seabed, typically in medium or coarse sands, but they also occur in large</p>

⁷ <https://www.sepa.org.uk/data-visualisation/water-classification-hub/>

	<p>where this could reduce supporting habitats and/or prey, should be avoided.</p>	<p>shoals in the water, typically 30-50m deep, where the sandeels feed on plankton (Harris & Wanless, 2011).</p> <p>The key supporting processes within the Sule Skerry and Sule Stack SPA for puffins may relate to the availability of and formation of suitable soil for their burrows. Should erosion of soil occur this could reduce the availability of suitable burrowing habitat for the puffins. As they are a species that feeds in the water column, they may also be affected by any increase in water turbidity that would affect their ability to successfully forage for their prey (Cook & Burton, 2010).</p>
<p>Common guillemot</p>	<p>Maintain the extent and distribution of the supporting habitats for guillemots within the site.</p> <p>and</p> <p>Maintain the variety and abundance of food resources and the condition of supporting habitats and associated processes.</p> <p>and</p> <p>Existing water quality should be maintained any increase in nutrients, turbidity or contaminants where this could reduce supporting habitats and/or prey, should be avoided.</p>	<p>Guillemots at the Sule Skerry and Sule Stack SPA require suitable habitat for breeding, foraging, resting, and other maintenance activities. They will use cliff ledges as their nesting habitat. Guillemots use areas close to the coast as well as offshore waters in which to forage and rest. Guillemots forage both at the seabed (demersal) and within the water column (pelagic) up to 200m, primarily during daylight hours (Wakefield <i>et al.</i> 2017).</p> <p>Breeding guillemot feed on small schooling fish including sandeels, clupeids, capelin, sprats and juvenile herring and cod (Wakefield <i>et al.</i> 2017). They may also consume molluscs, marine worms, squid, crustaceans and amphipods.</p> <p>The key supporting habitats for guillemots at Sule Skerry and Sule Stack SPA will relate to the availability of suitable nesting habitat. As they are a species that feeds in the water column, they can be potentially affected by any increase in turbidity that would affect their ability to successfully forage for their prey (Cook & Burton, 2010). Guillemots have been shown to show a weak preference for frontal regions and for substrate containing a relatively low proportion of gravel (Wakefield <i>et al.</i> 2017). Guillemots have also been observed to forage in riptides (Wanless <i>et al.</i> 1990). Studies have also demonstrated guillemots foraging in areas at fronts between thermally distinct bodies of water (BirdLife International, 2022).</p>

<p>European storm petrel</p>	<p>Maintain or enhance the extent and distribution of the supporting habitats for European storm petrels within the sites.</p> <p>and</p> <p>Ensure the variety and abundance of food resources and the condition of supporting habitats and associated processes have the ability to recover.</p> <p>and</p> <p>Existing water quality should be maintained any increase in nutrients, turbidity or contaminants where this could reduce supporting habitats and/or prey, should be avoided.</p>	<p>Storm petrels require suitable habitat for nesting in burrows or crevices in the Sule Skerry and Sule Stack SPA. Their nest will usually be in a tunnel with little or no vegetation, though occasionally grass, bracken or seaweed may be used to form a nest within the burrow or crevice (Snow & Perrins, 1998). Storm petrels will use deep waters as well as shallower water over the shelf for foraging. Whilst most foraging takes place in pelagic and offshore areas, evidence exists that storm petrels may also forage in inshore marine waters. They have been recorded moving close inshore at night to exploit intertidal benthic organisms that migrate into the water column at high tides (Mitchell & Newton, 2004).</p> <p>Storm petrels will feed predominantly during the day, mainly on the wing by pattering, hovering and snatching, though they can rest on the water (Snow & Perrins, 1998) and may dive for food to a depth of not more than 0.5m (Flood <i>et al.</i> 2009). They will occasionally follow ships and attend trawlers (Bird Life International, 2022). Their diet will consist of mainly small fish (including from families Gadidae, Ammodytidae, Myctophidae, herring and sprats) as well as taking squid, surface crustaceans, zooplankton (including Ichthyoplankton) and medusa (including Copepoda, Euphausiacea, Chaetognatha, Anthomedusae). They will also feed on offal and carrion may be scavenged where available (Snow & Perrins, 1998). Whilst they are more generally known as being pelagic foragers of oceanic and neretic organisms, they have also been found to forage on littoral (Gobiidae) and suprabenthic intertidal organisms (mainly isopods Cirolanidae) (D’Elbee & Hemery, 1998).</p> <p>The key supporting processes in the terrestrial environment within the Sule Skerry and Sule Stack SPA for storm petrels may be availability and formation of suitable soil or maintenance of dry stone structures for their burrows. Should erosion of soil occur this could reduce the availability of suitable burrowing habitat for the storm petrels. In the marine environment, the key supporting processes for storm petrels at the Sule Skerry and Sule Stack SPA are not well known but in the breeding season they are usually found in the intermediate offshore and suboceanic zones between littoral and deep ocean, from 10°C isotherm to 25°C isotherm (Snow & Perrins, 1998). Stone <i>et al.</i> (1995) found storm petrels were present in deep waters, out to the shelf edge and into the deep sea, primarily in waters >50m, with a peak in the outer shelf area (100-200m).</p>
<p>European shag</p>	<p>Maintain or enhance the extent and distribution of the supporting habitats for shags within the site.</p> <p>and</p>	<p>Shags require suitable habitat for breeding, foraging, loafing, bathing, and other maintenance activities within the Sule Skerry and Sule Stack SPA. Shags prefer rocky coasts with deep, clear water and forage over sandy and rocky seabeds (del Hoyo <i>et al.</i> 1992).</p> <p>In the Sule Skerry and Sule Stack SPA shags will nest on ledges, crevices or small caves, building nests from twigs, seaweed, and occasionally from man-made sources. In the marine extension waters, shags will feed in the nearshore environment. As such, foraging areas tend to coincide with areas of</p>

	<p>Ensure the variety and abundance of food resources and the condition of supporting habitats and associated processes have the ability to recover.</p> <p>and</p> <p>Existing water quality should be maintained and any increase in eutrophication or water turbidity, where this could reduce supporting habitats and/or prey, should be avoided.</p>	<p>sandy benthic sediment, and occur where depth is less than 80m (Daunt <i>et al.</i> 2015). Shags dive to 10-40m, though dives of more than 50m have been recorded (Daunt <i>et al.</i> 2015). Shags will also forage in sheltered bays and channels, and will generally avoid estuaries, shallow or muddy inlets and fresh or brackish waters (Wanless & Harris 1997; BirdLife International, 2022). They will also forage within kelp forests (Kelly, 2005).</p> <p>Shags are predominantly benthic feeding piscivores, taking a wide range of demersal, benthic and pelagic fish. Sandeels are their dominant prey species (Wanless & Harris, 1997). Other fish of the families Gadidae, Clupeidae, Cottidae, and Labridae are also consumed. However polychaetes, cephalopods, other molluscs and small benthic crustaceans have also been recorded in their diet (Barrett <i>et al.</i> 1990; del Hoyo <i>et al.</i> 1992).</p> <p>The key supporting habitats and processes for shags at the Sule Skerry and Sule Stack SPA may relate to the availability of suitable nesting habitat, as well as water quality (nutrients and turbidity), tidal cycles, and water flow. Shags have been recorded commonly feeding in areas with strong tidal flow (Wanless <i>et al.</i> 1991). Shags tend to avoid muddy areas for foraging, suggesting that reduced visibility in turbid waters may hamper their foraging. Strong winds have also been noted to negatively affect the foraging efficiency of this species (Lewis <i>et al.</i> 2015), and thus having sheltered areas closer to the shore will be important for shags.</p>
Leach's storm petrel	<p>Maintain or enhance the extent and distribution of the supporting habitats for Leach's petrels within the site.</p> <p>and</p> <p>Ensure the variety and abundance of food resources and the condition of supporting habitats and associated processes have the ability to recover.</p>	<p>Leach's petrel at the Sule Skerry and Sule Stack SPA require grass for burrows, or crevices, rock, boulders or walls for nesting habitat. They will forage in pelagic waters over shelf break and continental slope deep waters. They feed during the day and return to their burrows at night. They may use deeper waters to rest in large flocks, often tightly packed together (Camphuysen, 2007).</p> <p>Leach's petrels feed by dipping and pattering, with a smaller proportion of birds feeding by surface seizing (Camphuysen, 2007). Their diet comprises mainly of small fish, squid, planktonic crustaceans and offal from fishing vessels (BirdLife International, 2019). They may also follow marine mammals, feeding on leftovers or faeces.</p> <p>The supporting processes for Leach petrels at the Sule Skerry and Sule Stack SPA may relate to the availability of suitable grass, rocks and boulders for nesting. In marine waters, they are more commonly recorded foraging in areas with steep salinity and sea surface temperature gradients as well as in areas of strong currents in continental shelf waters, in deep waters (Camphuysen, 2007) and in areas of convergence (BirdLife International, 2022).</p>

	<p>and</p> <p>Existing water quality should be maintained and any increase in eutrophication or water turbidity, where this could reduce supporting habitats and/or prey, should be avoided.</p>	
Northern gannet	<p>Maintain the extent and distribution of the supporting habitats for northern gannet within the site.</p> <p>and</p> <p>Maintain the variety and abundance of food resources and the condition of supporting habitats and associated processes.</p> <p>and</p> <p>Existing water quality should be maintained any increase in nutrients, turbidity or contaminants where this could reduce supporting habitats</p>	<p>Gannets require suitable habitat for breeding, foraging, loafing, and other maintenance activities within the Sule Skerry and Sule Stack SPA. Gannets forage over shelf waters, and in water closer to shore. Gannets will plunge dive to around 11m, but can then carry out wing-propelled pursuit to deeper depths of around 24m within the water column. At breeding grounds they will use cliff habitat to nest colonially.</p> <p>Gannets have a flexible diet and are capable of exploiting a wide variety of pelagic fish prey, including: sandeel, haddock, whiting, blue whiting, cod, saithe, mackerel, sprat, herring and red gurnard. Gannets may also take advantage of fishery discards, though the level of this will differ depending on the individual (Votier <i>et al.</i> 2010). Prey taken may differ markedly in size from 0-group sandeels (mean = 7.8 cm) to haddock (29.1 cm) and trout (34.0 cm) (Hamer <i>et al.</i> 2000).</p> <p>Information is lacking on the supporting habitats and processes for gannets at the Sule Skerry and Sule Stack SPA, but may relate to availability of nesting habitat, water quality (nutrients) and water flow.</p>

	and/or prey, should be avoided.	
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Annex 2. Supporting information

Factors determining the potential for feature recovery.

Feature	Factors determining the potential for feature recovery
Atlantic puffin	<p>The estimated generation length for puffins is 14.2 years (Bird <i>et al.</i> 2020). Puffins can live up to around 40 years old (Fransson <i>et al.</i> 2010), though more commonly to less than 30 years (Harris & Wanless, 2011). Most birds do not visit their breeding colony until 2-3 years old (Snow & Perrins, 1998) and age at first breeding is usually 6 years old (Bird <i>et al.</i> 2020). Puffins have one clutch per year with a single egg (Snow & Perrins, 1998), meaning they have a low reproductive rate. This means any effect which causes a decline in numbers could limit the ability for the population to recover. Young leave their burrow at night and make their way to the sea when ready to fledge (Snow & Perrins, 1998), which can be a vulnerable time for the fledged puffins. Adult survival rates have been estimated at 0.913 (Bird <i>et al.</i> 2020) and average productivity rate is 0.617 (Horwille & Robinson, 2015). Any effect on adult mortality can potentially have serious effects on breeding numbers. As with other long-lived seabird species, the adult will balance parental investment into their current breeding attempt with their own need to survive, and future reproductive attempts.</p> <p>In winter, puffins use marine waters outwith their breeding colony waters with some individuals reaching the Azores, Canary Islands, north-west Africa, the western Mediterranean, and the west Atlantic, though many remain within the North Sea (Harris & Wanless, 2011). Pressures at their wintering grounds or during their flightless moult period between February and mid-March may have subsequent consequences for their breeding period. In spring, birds will assemble in large rafts on the water pre-breeding, where courtship takes place, close inshore near their breeding areas (Snow & Perrins, 1998). Disturbance during this time may have consequences for the breeding season. Puffins display a high degree of nest site fidelity and will often use the same burrows across different years (Harris & Wanless, 2011), which may limit individual ability to adapt to changes within these areas and hence potential for population recovery from perturbations.</p> <p>Puffins are pursuit divers and are dependent on high quality fish, such as juvenile sandeels or herring, for successful chick rearing (Wanless <i>et al.</i> 2005; Harris <i>et al.</i> 2007; Miles <i>et al.</i> 2015). Their specialised tongue enables them to capture several fish in one dive and if intended for young can be stacked across the beak (Snow & Perrins, 1998). In years of poor sandeel availability they have demonstrated an ability to forage for alternative prey resources (Harris <i>et al.</i> 2007; Wanless <i>et al.</i> 2005), however this switch of prey resource may have a consequence on productivity or adult survival. Puffins, as with other auk species, have a high wing loading, meaning that there is a high energetic cost of flight (as seen in guillemots and razorbills, see Thaxter <i>et al.</i> 2010). This may mean if they have to travel further to find food they may suffer energetically (Masden <i>et al.</i> 2010).</p>
Common guillemot	<p>Guillemot estimated generation length is 14.8 years and age of first breeding is 4 years (Bird <i>et al.</i> 2020). Guillemots can live in excess of 40 years (Fransson <i>et al.</i> 2010), though the average lifespan is likely to be less than 25 years. Guillemots lay a single egg and will not relay if the egg is lost (Snow & Perrins, 1998), meaning they have a slow reproductive rate. As with many species, productivity of first time breeders is relatively low, and for guillemots</p>

	<p>stabilises from the fifth breeding attempt (Crespin <i>et al.</i> 2006). When ready to fledge the chick will leave the nest site and joins the male of the pair on the sea, where they then travel further out to sea together and remain close for around two months (Harris & Wanless, 2004). In this post-fledgling period, the chicks will be vulnerable to predation at this lifestage being less able to escape predators (from late July-end of August during fledging). Adult survival is estimated as being 0.935 (Bird <i>et al.</i> 2020) and average productivity 0.672 (Horswill & Robinson, 2015). Any effect on adult mortality can potentially have serious effects on breeding numbers. As with other long-lived seabird species, the adult will balance parental investment into their current breeding attempt with their own need to survive, and future reproductive attempts.</p> <p>The majority of guillemots in UK waters during the non-breeding season are likely to be from UK colonies (Furness, 2015). Few adults move beyond UK waters, although immatures range more widely during the non-breeding season (Furness, 2015). Non-breeding adults tend to remain near their breeding colonies throughout the year and attend their nest ledges, except during their flightless moult period from beginning of August to mid-October. Pressures during this moult period, where adults will be flightless for 1-2 months, could have a subsequent effect on reproduction or survival.</p> <p>Guillemots are not particularly agile in the air and they find take-off from water difficult (Bédard, 1985), which may limit their ability to avoid e.g. fast moving vessels. A guillemot's foraging technique means that they only carry one fish back to their chick at a time, whereas other auk species can carry multiple fish. This limits the quantity of prey they can bring back to their chick each day. As guillemots can dive deeply, they can feed both at the seabed (on demersal prey) and in the water column (on pelagic prey) (Wakefield <i>et al.</i> 2017), meaning they may have more flexibility in the prey items they can forage on, depending on their availability. Guillemots, as with other auk species, have a high wing loading, meaning that there is a high energetic cost of flight (Thaxter <i>et al.</i> 2010). This may mean if they have to travel further to find food they may suffer energetically (Masden <i>et al.</i> 2010).</p>
<p>European shag</p>	<p>Estimated generation length is 9.2 years and maximum known longevity is around 30 years (Bird <i>et al.</i> 2020). Age at first breeding is normally at 2 or 3 years old (Wanless & Harris, 2004). Clutch size is usually 3 (1-6) eggs and they will only have one brood per breeding season (Cramp & Simmons, 2004). Their pre-laying period is in March, their egg incubation period from April-June and takes 30-31 days; and their chick rearing period is between June-August and can take 48-58 days (Cramp & Simmons, 2004). Shags often defer breeding for a year if local conditions are unfavourable (Wanless & Harris, 2004). Adult survival rates have been estimated as being between 0.85 (Bird <i>et al.</i> 2020) to 0.88 per annum for well-studied Isle of May birds (Wanless & Harris, 2004). Average productivity is estimated as 1.303 (Horswill & Robinson, 2015). Recruitment rates are relatively low which means any effect which causes a decline in numbers could limit the ability for the population to recover. Survival and productivity are thought to be affected by the amount of available prey (Wanless & Harris, 2004). Any effect on adult mortality can potentially have serious effects on breeding numbers.</p> <p>European shags are a resident UK species and present around the UK coastline throughout the year. In winter, numbers of shags move short distance migrations within and between Scotland and England and a few cross the North Sea to Norway. The winter distribution closely resembles that during the breeding season, but not localised to breeding colonies (Goodship</p>

	<p>& Furness, 2019). Immatures may disperse over short distances post-breeding (del Hoyo <i>et al.</i> 1992). Adults return to breeding sites from February, with their main breeding period being from March-end of September and thus their non-breeding period is from late September-early February. They are highly site faithful, both in the breeding period (Aebischer <i>et al.</i> 2008) and in their non-breeding period with preferred roost sites (Grist <i>et al.</i> 2014), which may limit individual ability to adapt to changes within these areas and hence potential for population recovery from perturbations.</p> <p>Shags are predominantly benthic feeding piscivores (Wanless <i>et al.</i> 1991) and whilst their diet is largely associated with sandeels, they have a wide prey base of demersal and pelagic fish. At some colonies (Isle of May), shags have demonstrated an ability to switch prey items in times of poor sandeel availability, but it is not known if this has population consequences for the shags, or indeed whether the ability to prey switch is possible in all locations (e.g. more northern locations) (Daunt <i>et al.</i> 2015). The available data on shag feeding habitat suggest that, within the inshore zone as a whole, the species is fairly plastic in its habitat requirements (BirdLife International, 2022).</p> <p>Shag plumage is different to other seabird species in that it requires a ‘wing-drying’ process after foraging/diving, as their feathers are not fully water-repellent. They require longer period of ‘wing drying’ depending on the weather conditions and how long they had been under water for (Debout & Sellers, 1995). Their lack of complete waterproofing may explain why they are so susceptible to increased storminess and extreme weather which can lead to mass mortality ‘wreck’ events for shags, particularly in the winter, (Bustnes <i>et al.</i> 2013; Frederiksen <i>et al.</i> 2008). Shags also tend to nest further down the cliff, making them vulnerable to summer storms when large waves hit the coastlines, potentially resulting in nests lower down becoming washed out or swept away. Extreme weather events in the summer periods with increased high winds and rainfall have previously resulted in widespread breeding failures (Aebischer, 1993).</p>
<p>European storm petrel</p>	<p>European storm petrels estimated generation length is 13.8 years (Bird <i>et al.</i> 2020). The maximum recorded age for storm petrel is 38 years, though the average lifespan is around 11 years old (BTO, 2019). They first breed in their 4th or 5th year (Snow & Perrins, 1998). Similar to other procelliforms, storm petrels lay a single egg with only one clutch per year, meaning they have a very low reproductive rate. Their incubation (38-50 days) and chick rearing (56-86 days) periods (Snow & Perrins, 1998) are also long, even in comparison to other seabird species. Feeding visits by parents may be daily for the chick but will drop off closer to fledging period (Snow & Perrins, 1998). Adult survival rates have been estimated as 0.88 (Bird <i>et al.</i> 2020). No data on productivity has been produced for UK colonies (Mitchell & Newton, 2004). Any effect on adult mortality can potentially have serious effects on breeding numbers.</p> <p>European storm petrels are a migratory species which will migrate to more southerly locations for their winter, especially off west Africa and South Africa (Snow & Perrins, 1998). Pressures in their wintering grounds and on migration could limit potential for populations to recover from impacts arising in breeding areas. Unusual for migratory petrels, storm petrel wing moult begins whilst still at the breeding grounds (Arroyo <i>et al.</i> 2004) and they continue their whole moult slowly over a 7-8 month period (Bolton & Thomas, 2001). Primary wing moult may occur as early as June for non-breeders or failed breeders</p>

	<p>(Warham, 1996; Arroyo <i>et al.</i> 2004), and typically in September for current breeders (Bolton & Thomas, 2001).</p> <p>Storm petrels are highly site faithful to their burrow (Mainwood, 1976). High site fidelity may limit individual ability to adapt to changes within breeding areas and hence potential for population recovery from perturbations. At their breeding sites, storm petrels rely on being able to hear their mate or chick calling in the burrow to know which burrow is theirs, in combination with their burrow's smell (Snow & Perrins, 1998). Any disruptions to them being able to hear their mate or chick calling could have implications for their breeding attempt.</p> <p>The physiology of storm petrels with their legs being placed so far back along their body means they are unable to walk on land (RSPB, 2019), instead having to shuffle on their tarsi. This means they are particularly vulnerable to predation from mammalian or large gull predators when on land.</p>
Leach's storm petrel	<p>Estimated generation length of Leach's petrel is 14.8 years with age at first breeding being 5 years old (Bird <i>et al.</i> 2020). Their maximum age recorded is 36 years old (Bird <i>et al.</i> 2020). Similar to other procelliforms, Leach's petrels lay a single egg with only one clutch per year possible, which means they have a very low reproductive rate. Their incubation (41-42 days) and chick rearing (63-70 days) periods are also long in comparison to other seabird species (Snow & Perrins, 1998). Adult survival rates have been estimated to be 0.84 (Bird <i>et al.</i> 2020), though lower rates have been noted (0.78-0.79) (Fife <i>et al.</i> 2015; Morse & Buchheister, 1977). Any effect on adult mortality can potentially have serious effects on breeding numbers. As a long-lived seabird species, the adult will balance parental investment into their current breeding attempt with their own need to survive, and future reproductive attempts.</p> <p>94% of the UK breeding population breed on four islands in the St Kilda archipelago. This means that should anything affect this breeding population, it could have a detrimental effect on the UK population as a whole.</p> <p>As a burrow-nesting species, should anything affect the nesting habitat/substrate or should the habitat be trampled/disrupted, this could have a detrimental effect and limit the potential for the petrels to breed and thus recover.</p>
Northern gannet	<p>Estimated generation length of gannets is 15.0 years and the maximum longevity recorded is 37.4 years (Bird <i>et al.</i> 2020). Age of first breeding is 5 years old (Horswill & Robinson, 2015). Northern gannets lay a single egg; incubation is 42-46 days and chick rearing 84-97 days (Snow & Perrins, 1998), one of the longest chick rearing periods of any seabird species. Chicks fledge with large fat stores and begin migration by swimming, independent from their parents (Wanless, 2002) until their fat load is reduced. Their productivity is estimated at 0.700 (Horswill & Robinson, 2015). Local productivity rates have been linked to parental experience and increase sequentially between the first and the fourth breeding attempt (Nelson, 2010). Adult survival is estimated as being 0.940 (Bird <i>et al.</i> 2020), one of the highest of all seabirds. Wanless <i>et al.</i> (2006) found that about 30% of young survive to an age of four years with annual survival over the first four years of life increasing gradually from 0.424 to 0.895 before reaching this adult value. Any effect on adult mortality can potentially have serious effects on breeding numbers.</p>

Gannets leave their colonies mainly between August-October, with their subsequent migration taking up to four weeks to complete, as birds spend time sitting on the water or foraging locally rather than travelling consistently towards their goal (Kubetzki *et al.* 2009). Gannets from Bass Rock, Scotland have been tracked to their wintering grounds further south in the southern North Sea and English Channel, the Bay of Biscay and Celtic Sea, in the Mediterranean Sea and off West Africa (Kubetzki *et al.* 2009) Pressures in wintering grounds (e.g. entanglement in fishing gears) could limit potential for populations to recover from impacts arising in summer foraging areas.

Gannets have the ability to forage large distances during the breeding period (Woodward *et al.* 2019) and have a wide prey base, meaning they may be more resilient to changes in prey abundances close to their breeding colonies. Spatial partitioning of foraging grounds among breeding adults from different colonies, as revealed by tracking data, (Wakefield *et al.* 2013) may mean that there is some limitation in where they will forage.

Newly fledged gannets may be potentially vulnerable (e.g. to collision or pollution) when initially moving away from their natal colonies by swimming. However, given high natural mortality rate among juveniles, it is changes in adult survival rates that are most likely to drive population change (Wanless *et al.* 2006).

Annex 3: Glossary for Conservation Objectives and References

Glossary

Conservation Objective term	Definition
Distribution	The “distribution” is how the qualifying feature is spread out within the site.
Favourable condition	This refers to the assessed condition of a feature through Site Condition Monitoring. Features considered to be in favourable condition for the purposes of these Conservation Objectives are those that have an assessed condition of either: <ul style="list-style-type: none"> • Favourable Declining - The attribute targets set for the natural feature have been met, but evidence suggests that its condition will worsen unless remedial action is taken. • Favourable Maintained - the attribute targets set for the natural features have been met, and the natural feature is likely to be secure on the site under present conditions. • Favourable Recovered - the condition of the natural feature has recovered from a previous unfavourable condition, and attribute targets are now being met.
Generation length	Generation length is “the average age of parents of the current cohort”. Generation length therefore reflects the turnover rate of breeding individuals in a population (IUCN, 2019).
Maintain	Where a qualifying feature of the SPA is assessed as being in favourable condition the conservation objective is ‘maintain’. This means that the various attributes of the feature should be kept at that favourable level. This can include increasing/improving condition as well, but not a permanent decline.
Marine birds	This term encompasses true seabirds and waterfowl (seaducks, divers, and grebes).
Metapopulation	A group of connected populations of a species within a defined area, where the individual populations may interact with one another.
Restore	Where a qualifying feature of the SPA is assessed as being in unfavourable condition the conservation objective is ‘restore’. This means that the various attributes of the feature should be returned to the favourable level by increasing/improving condition.
Site integrity	The integrity of a site is defined in general terms as the coherence of its ecological structures and function, across its whole area, which enables it to sustain the habitat, complex of habitats and and/or the levels of populations of the species for which it was designated.
Site reference population	This refers to the estimated population figure for the site and should be used to form the basis of carrying out HRAs. In most cases, the site reference population will be the baseline population (figure at designation). However, where recent surveys show a population to have increased or stayed stable, the current population is considered the most appropriate population figure to use for HRA’s.

Conservation Objective term	Definition
Supporting habitats and processes	This includes the following environmental conditions (but is not limited to) which are important for maintaining/restoring the protected features, e.g. hydrography and supporting water currents, chemical water quality parameters, suspended sediment levels, radionuclide levels.
Unfavourable condition	This refers to the assessed condition of a feature through Site Condition Monitoring. Features considered to be in unfavourable condition for the purposes of these Conservation Objectives are those that have an assessed condition of either: <ul style="list-style-type: none"> • Unfavourable recovering - One or more of the attribute targets have not been met on the site, but management measures are in place to improve the condition. • Unfavourable no change - One or more of the attribute targets have not been met, and recovery is unlikely under the present management and activity on the site. • Unfavourable declining - One or more of the attribute targets have not been met, evidence suggests that condition will worsen unless remedial action is taken.
Waterfowl	Encompasses seaducks, grebes and divers.

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