WELSH MPA NETWORK COMPLETION PROJECT: FREQUENTLY ASKED QUESTIONS (FAQS)

High level FAQs:

What are marine protected areas (MPAs)?

A marine protected area (MPA) is generally any area of sea or shore protected by law and managed to conserve habitats, species, or other natural processes. These areas can be used in a sustainable way. The habitats and species (or other natural processes) protected in MPAs are called 'features'.

What types of MPA do we have in Wales?

There are five different types of MPAs which contribute to an ecologically coherent MPA network in Welsh waters.

- **Special Areas of Conservation** (SACs): protect certain habitats and species under the European Habitats Directive (1992). There are 15 SACs in Wales. These cover a wide variety of habitats such as reefs, estuaries, sandbanks and offshore bubbling reef. They also cover species such as grey seal, bottlenose dolphin and harbour porpoise.
- SACs are designated under the Conservation of Habitats and Species Regulations 2017 and the Conservation of Offshore Marine Habitats and Species Regulations 2017

- **Special Protection Areas** (SPAs): protect wild bird populations under the European Birds directive (1979). There are 13 SPAs in Wales. SPAs cover migrating birds and large aggregations of listed species. Over recent years the network has been extended to include at sea protection for seabirds. SPAs are designated under the Conservation of Habitats and Species Regulations 2017 and the Conservation of Offshore Marine Habitats and Species Regulations 2017.

- **Marine Conservation Zones** (MCZs) protect marine species, habitats, or geological features of interest. There is currently one MCZ in Welsh waters. MCZs are designated under the Marine and Coastal Access Act (2009). In 2014, Part 5 of the Marine Act came into force. As a result, the Marine Nature Reserve was reclassified as an MCZs.

- **Sites of Special Scientific Interest** (SSSIs) protect certain wildlife and geology under the Wildlife and Countryside Act 1981. There are currently 107 SSSIs in Wales. SSSIs capture important habitats and species at a more local level, ensuring that rare and scarce habitats and species and excellent examples of habitats are protected regionally. SSSIs can cover the seashore down to the lowest tide and the seabed of estuary channels.

- **Ramsar sites** protect internationally important wetland habitats and species mostly birds, required by the 1971 international wetlands convention ('Ramsar Convention'). There are currently 3 Ramsar sites in Wales.

Why do we need MPAs?

Welsh Government is committed to delivering clean, healthy, safe, productive and biologically diverse seas. One way to achieve a resilient marine environment in Wales is through a network of well managed Marine Protected Areas (MPAs), which contribute to a wider, ecologically coherent network of MPAs around the UK. They help to keep areas of biological, social and financial value in a healthy, productive state, with diverse life that benefits everyone.

A well-managed MPA network is a key tool for conserving the Welsh marine environment and the services it provides, now and for future generations.

What is an ecologically coherent network?

A network of MPAs refers to all the different types of MPAs for biodiversity taken together as a full set of protected sites. MPAs have been designated over the years under different legislation, for different sets of habitats and species and at different scales. Whilst this has been effective at protecting certain habitats and species, there have been some areas where little or no protection has been provided, especially for sediments that are further offshore and some of our more rare or threatened habitats and species. The OSPAR network principles brought in the idea that in order to adequately protect the diversity of the marine environment we had to ensure that examples of all habitats and species that are present within our seas are protected in a number of sites and they are suitably spread out within our waters. This forms the basis of an ecologically coherent network of MPAs and has been adopted by the UK and devolved governments[1]

Our understanding of an ecologically coherent network is based on the OSPAR MPA network principles[2]. These principles recommend that all habitats and species (features) are represented in an MPA network and that there are enough examples of these features protected to ensure the variety is captured. The features must also be included in more than one MPA and be close enough to sites with similar features to ensure connectivity. Our interpretation of the OSPAR MPA network principles is summarised in the following table.

[1] https://gov.wales/sites/default/files/publications/2018-05/marine-protected-areas-mpas-network-joint-uk-administrations-statement.pdf

[2] https://www.ospar.org/work-areas/bdc/marine-protected-areas/guidance-for-the-development-and-management-of-the-ospar-network

Principles for Welsh MPA Network	Criteria	Justification
Representation	Each feature on the MPA feature list for Wales is represented in Welsh MPAs. *A minimum of 10% by area of each* broad-scale habitat feature (habitats that characterise the marine area) is protected within each region.	Ensures that the full range of habitats and species are represented within the network. Ensures an appropriate amount of each habitat is represented within the network for it to be effective and ecologically viable.
Replication	Two examples of each broad-scale habitat feature are protected within each region. Where a feature is of conservation interest, three examples of the feature are protected within each region (where distribution allows).	The provision of replicates builds in resilience from impact. Ensures that all broad-scale habitats and rare/or threatened species and habitats are represented and afforded protection within the network. Due to the general nature of broad scale habitats only two examples are required to adequately protect the feature within the region, however due to the rare/threatened / declining status of features of conservation importance an additional example (three in total) are required to provide adequate protection within the region.
Connectivity	MPAs with similar habitat types are no more than 80km apart. Examples of each habitat across varying depths (where they occur).	Positioning sites with similar features no more than 80 km apart ensures that they are more likely to be ecologically connected to each other[3]. Providing examples of each habitat across varying depths ensures the MPA network is well distributed and considers links between marine ecosystems.

How many MPAs are there already?

There are currently 139 MPAs in Welsh waters. They cover 69% of Welsh inshore waters, out to 12 nautical miles, and 50% of all Welsh waters, out to the median line. These cover the wide variety of habitats and species found within Welsh waters. There is more information on the MPA network here.

[3] The 80km spacing was identified by Roberts et al (2010) as a guideline for the greatest distance between sites supporting similar habitats to ensure sufficient ecological connectivity. Roberts, C.M., Hawkins, J.P., Fletcher, J., Hands, S., Raab, K. and Ward, S. 2010. It has since been used by OSPAR in assessing connectivity.

Why do we need more MPAs?

MPAs are an important tool to help protect the Welsh marine environment and keep our seas healthy, resilient, and brimming with life.

Welsh Government have many national and international obligations to develop an ecologically coherent and well-managed network of MPAs.

The Welsh MPA network assessment completed in 2016 and reviewed in 2019 found MPAs in Wales are making a substantial contribution to the ecological coherence of the network. Welsh MPAs represent most habitats and species and, where possible, replicate features to ensure the network is resilient and well connected. The assessment identified a small number of shortfalls in protection of some features in the Welsh contribution to the UK network. These shortfalls are being considered for MCZ identification.

In 2017, the Minister for the Environment and Rural Affairs committed to using the findings of the 2016 network assessment to complete the Welsh contribution to the wider UK MPA network. Welsh Government are now in the process of identifying more MCZs. This will ensure that the full range of habitats and species found in Welsh waters are represented in the network, and help to keep them healthy, resilient and brimming with life.

What is an MCZ?

Marine Conservation Zones (MCZs) protect marine species, habitats or geological features of interest. MCZs are designated under the Marine and Coastal Access Act (2009). In 2014, Part 5 of the Marine Act came into force. As a result, the Skomer Marine Nature Reserve was reclassified as an MCZ.

Activities are managed according to the potential impact they have on the designated features through the assessment of the activity against the conservation objectives of the site.

Welsh MPA Network Completion project specific FAQs:

Which features are being considered for new MCZs?

The Welsh MPA network assessment focused on the following categories of habitat and species features:

- Broad-scale habitats. Broad-scale habitats are groupings of habitat types with similar physical and biological characteristics e.g. sediment type, depth, biological communities etc. By protecting all broad-scale habitats it ensures that the MPA network represents the full range of habitats in Welsh waters.
- Habitats of conservation importance. These habitats are of particular conservation interest and have been included in the OSPAR threatened and/or declining list of habitats and species[4]; or the Environment (Wales) Act 2016 interim Section 7 list of habitats and species of principal importance[5].

[4] List of Threatened and/or Declining Species & Habitats | OSPAR Commission
[5] Wales Biodiversity Partnership - Environment (Wales) Act (biodiversitywales.org.uk)

- Sessile and limited mobility species of conservation importance. These species are of particular conservation interest and have been included in the OSPAR threatened and/or declining list of habitats and species[6]; or the Environment (Wales) Act 2016 interim Section 7 list of habitats and species of principal importance[7].

Species such as marine mammals and birds are an important part of the ecosystem. However, they are not included in this assessment. How we protect these species within the Welsh MPA network is assessed through separate processes.

The Welsh MPA network completion project focusses on the following features:

Feature	Type	Description
Subtidal coarse sediment	Broad-scale habitat	Coarse sand, gravel, pebbles, shingle and cobbles that is always under water. This habitat is often unstable due to tidal currents and/or wave action.
Subtidal sand	Broad-scale habitat	Sandy seabed that is always under water. The wave action reduces most mud and clay leaving a loose, changeable habitat which is home to species like flatfish and sand eels.
Subtidal mud	Broad-scale habitat	Cohesive sandy muds and mud that are always under water. Extends from the extreme lower shore to offshore, deep sea habitats
Subtidal mixed sediment	Broad-scale habitat	This habitat covers a range of sediments. These include muddy gravelly sands and mosaics of cobbles and pebbles embedded in or lying upon the sediment. This mix of sediments and small rocks can allow a variety of animals living within the sediment and on the cobbles and pebbles.
Fragile sponge and anthozoan communities on subtidal rocky habitat	Habitat of conservation importance	This community is made up of sponges that grow proud of the seabed and anthozoans (soft corals, sea fans, and colonial anemones). They require sufficient water movement to bring a ready supply of food. As a result, they are found on shores which are exposed to waves or currents, but also with local shelter from the full force of the waves and tides.
Mud habitats in deep water	Habitat of conservation importance	Cohesive sandy muds and mud that are found in depths greater than 20m.
Sea-pen and burrowing megafauna communities	Habitat of conservation importance	On stable plains of fine mud, areas of the seabed may be marked by prominent mounds. These mounds are made by animals like the volcano worm, burrows (e.g. from Dublin Bay prawns and other crustaceans) and delicate sea-pens that reach up into the water to collect food.
Ross worm reefs	Habitat of conservation importance	The Ross worm cements grains of sand together to form a tube. These can be found individually or in aggregations forming large reefs. In reef form the worm tubes rise vertically off the sandy or gravelly seabed providing habitat and food for other sea life such as crabs and juvenile fish.

[6] List of Threatened and/or Declining Species & Habitats | OSPAR Commission

[7] Wales Biodiversity Partnership - Environment (Wales) Act (biodiversitywales.org.uk)

Feature	Type	Description
Ocean quahog *Arctica islandica*	Sessile and limited mobility species of conservation importance	Ocean quahogs (a type of bivalve mollusc/clam) can be found from just below the low water level to depths of about 500m. They live buried in sediment, often entirely hidden with just a small tube extending up to the surface of the seabed. They can live for over 500 years.
Pink sea-fan *Eunicella verrucosa*	Sessile and limited mobility species of conservation importance	The slow growing pink sea-fan (a type of soft coral) that lives in areas of strong currents on the rocky reefs. The branches are covered in small bumps from which small anemone like structures emerge to feed. They can grow up to 50cm high and can live for 100 years.

Why is the process feature led?

The MPA network assessment identified shortfalls in the protection of a small number of features in the Welsh contribution to the UK MPA network. Additional sites are needed in the Welsh MPA network to protect these features and ensure the full range of habitats and species found in Welsh waters are represented. To ensure that Wales fully contributes to the UK MPA network, we are looking to progress sites for these features only.

Is the Welsh MPA network completion project ambitious enough? Should we be striving to include more habitat in new MCZs?

The OSPAR MPA network principles recommend that at least 10% of each broad scale habitat should be protected within the MPA network, with an aspirational target of 20%.

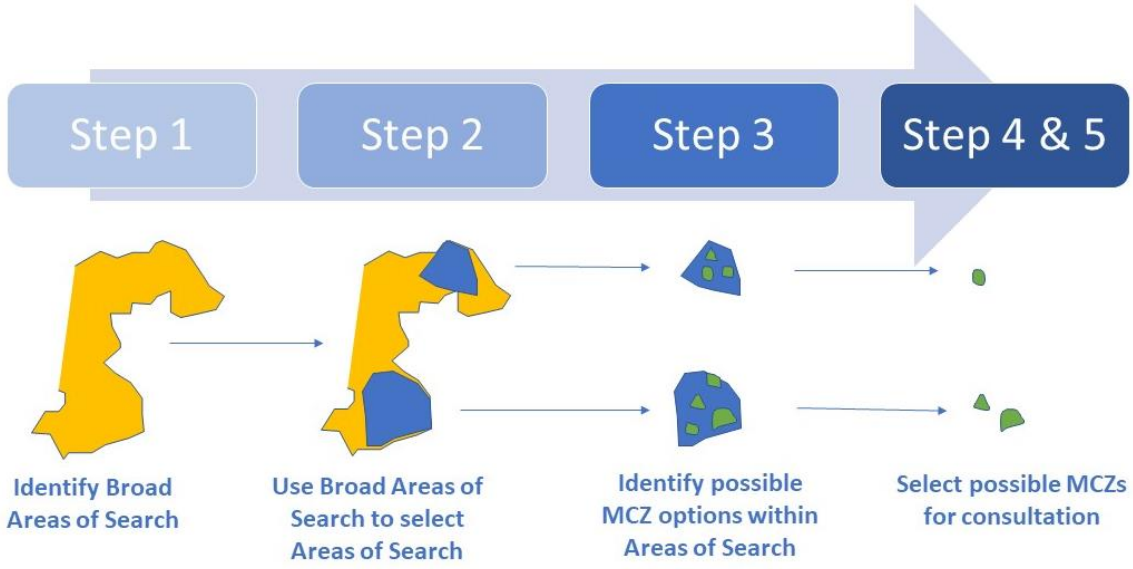
The amounts of habitat protected in our existing SAC series goes above and beyond the aspirational 20% recommended by OSPAR for most habitats in Welsh waters, with for example 30-90% of rocky habitats currently protected.

What are the 7 steps of the MPA network completion project?

- **Step 1: Broad Areas of Search:** NRW and JNCC drafted a Broad Area of Search for each regional sea present in Welsh waters. These show the shortfalls identified in the MPA network assessment and their distribution throughout Welsh waters. The Broad Areas of Search account for areas where shortfalls are already protected and highlight areas of lower socio-economic activity to minimise impacts.
- **Step 2: Areas of Search:** More focussed areas of shortfall to give options of where possible MCZs could be located
- **Step 3: Defining boundaries**: Refining the area of search selection further by drawing indicative boundaries for possible MCZs within the Areas of Search.
- **Step 4: Pre-consultation preparation.** NRW and JNCC provide statutory pre-consultation advice on possible MCZs and Welsh Government prepare for public consultation

- **Step 5: Public consultation and engagement:** Welsh Government, with support from NRW and JNCC will co-ordinate a twelve-week public consultation including calls for relevant and published ecological and/or socio-economic data held by stakeholders.
- **Step 6: Post consultation preparation.** NRW and JNCC will review consultation feedback and evidence (including any refinements made to possible MCZ boundaries) and provide post-consultation statutory advice on recommended MCZs to Welsh Government. Welsh Government will prepare documentation for designation.
- **Step 7: Designation.** Following consideration of post-consultation statutory advice, consultation feedback and impact assessments, Welsh Minister makes a decision on MCZ proposals for designation.

Steps 1 to 5 are illustrated in the following figure.



What are Broad Areas of Search?

Broad Areas of Search are the first step in the process to find suitable areas for possible MCZs. Broad Areas of Search areas are not possible MCZs and they are larger than a possible MCZ is expected to be.

The Broad Areas of Search form Step 1 in the process of selecting suitable areas for possible MCZs in Welsh waters. The Broad Area of Search documents provide information about the feature shortfalls present in each regional sea. They were produced to help the TFG review extensive areas of habitat and determine where Areas of Search would be suitable. This included presenting the shortfalls outside of existing protected Annex I habitat, areas of currently licensed activities and existing infrastructure.

Why are we excluding areas of designated Annex I habitats in the Broad Areas of Search?

Habitat and species that are designated Annex I features within SACs are part of the network already. To address the shortfalls in the MPA network, we need to find examples of habitat and species that are outside of already protected feature. If we include areas covered by existing

Annex I features we will be double counting – effectively protecting the same area of habitat twice.

What are Areas of Search?

Areas of Search are the second step in the refinement process to find suitable areas for possible MCZs. Areas of Search are locations in Welsh waters that form Step 2 in the process of selecting possible MCZs.

It is from these Areas of Search that possible MCZs will be identified in Step 3 of the process. The Areas of Search should be larger than the shortfall requirement to allow several options to be developed and refined later on in the process.

The Task and Finish Group selected the Areas of Search from the Broad Areas of Search, using information on the features present and activities where data was available.

How are Welsh Government engaging with stakeholders?

Welsh Government set up a Task and Finish group (TFG) to support the Welsh MPA network completion project. The group is made up of volunteers from the Wales Marine Advisory and Action Group (WMAAG).

The stakeholders represent a range of sectors that have an interest in the management and accessibility of Welsh waters. The purpose of the group is for marine stakeholders to work in partnership with the Welsh Government, NRW and JNCC. They will identify possible Marine Conservation (MCZs) in Welsh waters, to complete the Welsh contribution to an ecologically coherent network of MPAs in UK waters. Members will:

- Make every effort to attend meetings or send a deputy when they aren't available to ensure the project keeps on track;
- Actively participate in meetings, openly sharing information and knowledge,
- Share information with their sector prior to meetings to gather their sector's views to inform meeting discussions;
- Following meetings, members have a responsibility for disseminating consistent messages with their respective networks and bringing forward any issues arising;
- Members will be respectful of each other's position; and
- Work constructively to find solutions in the event of any areas of disagreement.

Further engagement with wider stakeholders and the public will be carried out as the process develops.

When and how do I get my say?

There will be plenty of opportunities for you to share your views. This includes a twelve-week public consultation and calls for relevant and published ecological and/or socio-economic data held by stakeholders.

Stakeholder and community input are vital to the Welsh MPA network completion project.

To support the process, a Task and Finish Group has been created, made up of stakeholders that represent the range of sectors with an interest in the management and accessibility of Welsh waters. The Group will be responsible for helping to identify possible MCZs in Welsh waters, which will be subject to a twelve-week public consultation, likely to be in Spring 2024, before being put to Welsh Ministers for consideration.

Calls for data from stakeholders will take place once the identification of Areas of Search (Step 2 of the project) has happened, and during the public consultation in Spring 2024.

If you are interested in submitting ecological and socio-economic data relevant to any of the shortfall features, you can do so then. NRW and JNCC will consider relevant information while they develop their statutory advice to the Welsh Government on the possible MCZs. The Welsh Government will consider relevant information submitted within the impact assessments on possible MCZs.

What if I don't agree with the proposals?

Welsh Government in line with Section 117, (7) of the Marine Act (2009) may take into account economic or social consequences of designation of MCZs. Engagement and the public consultation will gather your views and consider socio-economic impacts while addressing the shortfalls in the network.

When will sites be designated?

The decision on whether to designate sites is the responsibility of Welsh Ministers. A decision would be expected in late 2024, depending on successful completion of the preceding stages.

Where are new MCZs likely to be?

The location of the new MCZs depend on where the shortfall features are. Many shortfall features such as broad-scale habitats are found in both offshore and inshore areas.

The majority of the existing MPAs that protect seabed habitats and species are found within inshore waters. There is a preference to locate MCZs in the offshore region (beyond 12 nautical miles) to include habitats in deeper waters so that the variety of habitats are included within the MPA network and to improve connectivity. There are some instances where the shortfall features are only found inshore.

Are you taking on board the recommendations of the 2013 MCZ Task and Finish Team report, that was commissioned by Welsh Government following the previous MCZ process in 2012?

Yes, after considering the report and recommendations of the Task and Finish Team, the Welsh Government formally withdrew its proposals for highly protected MCZs in 2013. The current MPA network completion project has adopted several of the recommendations, ensuring stakeholders are involved and engaged at key stages in the process.

Welsh Government listened to the views of stakeholders, following the issues that arose during the 2012 MCZ process.

They established a Task and Finish Team to consider how MCZs should be progressed in Wales. The Task and Finish Team was supported by a Stakeholder Focus Group which represented all the major marine users. In 2013, after considering the report and recommendations of the Task and Finish Team, the Welsh Government formally withdrew its proposals for highly protected MCZs.

Welsh Government commissioned the 2016 Welsh MPA network assessment, in response to one of the recommendations of the Task and Finish Team. The current MPA network completion project has adopted the relevant Task and Finish Team recommendations to designate MCZs to complete the Welsh contribution to an ecologically coherent network in the UK ensuring stakeholders are involved and engaged at key stages in the process.

Will activities be allowed in sites?

Yes, these sites will be multi-use. Activities are managed according to the potential impact they have on the designated features through the assessment of the activity against the conservation objectives of the site.

The presence of an MCZ will not automatically prevent existing or new activities, development or change.

In many cases, there will be no interaction between commercial or recreational activities and therefore no need for management measures. Following designation and the publication of conservation objectives, each MCZ will be managed as part of the wider network of MPAs in Wales, as set out in the MPA Management Framework[8].

As the group responsible for overseeing management of the MPA network in Wales, the MPA Management Steering Group will be kept informed throughout this process.

Welsh Government in line with Section 117 (7) of the Marine Act (2009) may take into account economic or social consequences of designation of MCZs. Engagement and consultation will gather views and will consider socio-economic impacts while addressing the shortfalls in the network.

Will these just be paper parks?

No. Paper parks are MPAs that exist in legislation but lack the protection to halt degradation. To ensure this does not happen, newly designated Welsh MCZs will be effectively managed to ensure their conservation objectives are achieved.

What sort of activities will be managed?

These sites will be multi-use. However, activities occurring on a feature to which it is sensitive will require management. There will be further opportunities to discuss management of any designated sites in the future.

[8] https://beta.gov.wales/marine-protected-area-network-management-framework-wales

Wales' existing network of MPAs, mainly SACs and SPAs, are functioning marine areas with a variety of different uses. These include shipping, energy, fisheries and recreational activities. Some activities and developments with the potential to adversely affect wildlife may need additional regulation. But, many marine and coastal activities coexist with the conservation of habitats and species.

Designation of further areas should not significantly affect the management and regulation of current activities which do not cause a detrimental effect on the features for which the sites are designated. There will be further opportunities to discuss management of any designated sites in the future.

What are conservation objectives and when will they be developed?

Conservation objectives are the ecological aims for the protected habitats and/or species within an MPA.

The Marine and Coastal Access Act requires conservation objectives to be established for MCZs.

A conservation objective describes the aim for the condition of the protected features. It is a starting point to inform management measures and monitoring needs.

As statutory nature conservation advisors, NRW and JNCC will give advice on the conservation objectives and potential management options for MCZs:

- Conservation objectives for the MCZ
- Advice on feature condition; and
- Advice on which activities may impact upon features.

Further information on the development of Conservation Objectives and management will be published in due course.

Why do we need more MPAs when some of the features of our existing MPAs aren't in favourable condition?

MPA designation is the first step towards managing a site to ensure its features are in favourable condition. There are various challenges when trying to identify the reasons for changes in the marine environment. Often, it can take a long time for the benefits of a management activity to be observed in the condition of a feature.

Some features take longer term management to reach favourable condition, but this should not stop us from designating more MPAs. The extent of the current network should not be a barrier to identifying additional MCZs, and the effective management of new and existing MPAs will help to increase the resilience of the marine ecosystem.

What about mobile species?

Highly mobile marine species, such as porpoises, dolphins, seals, fish and seabirds play an important role in our marine environment. They are often used as one of the key indicators in assessing the health of marine ecosystems.

Many mobile species are already protected by the MPA network in Wales, with MPAs for harbour porpoise, bottlenose dolphin, grey seals and a range of seabirds. The Welsh Government will consider the need for MCZs to protect any additional mobile species in future phases of work.

What about wider biodiversity?

We are identifying new MCZs to complete the MPA network by addressing the shortfalls highlighted in the network assessment. The management of the MCZs will only address the activities which have the potential to cause a detrimental effect on the features for which the sites are designated.

Step 3 of the project could look at how the site can support wider biodiversity through incidental protection. However, management measures will not be created to protect wider biodiversity.

What about Skomer?

Skomer was Wales' only Marine Nature Reserve (MNR) for 24 years and became the first MCZ in Wales in 2014. The conservation byelaws that were introduced to protect and manage the MNR remain in place.

A future phase of work for Skomer MCZ will involve the Welsh Government introducing a designating order, detailing the protected features of the MCZ and associated conservation objectives, as required by the Marine Act. NRW and stakeholders will inform this future phase of work.