

Proposals for a marine extension to the Outer Thames Estuary Special Protection Area

This Technical Information Note (TIN) has been prepared to help inform you about the development of recommendations to extend the Outer Thames Estuary Special Protection Area (SPA) into the surrounding marine environment. Other information notes explaining the process for classifying SPAs and about the bird species to be protected are available. For details see *Further Information* below.

Background

The Outer Thames Estuary SPA was classified in 2011 for its important non-breeding populations of red-throated diver *Gavia stellata*.

The UK Government has ongoing obligations under the European Union's Directive on the Conservation of Wild Birds ('the Birds Directive'), the legislation that requires SPA classification, to identify and classify SPAs. As part of work to identify potential marine SPAs in UK waters, Natural England has reviewed information provided by the Joint Nature Conservation Committee (JNCC) based on survey work carried out in the waters around a number of seabird colonies.

In light of this work, areas of sea adjacent to the Outer Thames Estuary SPA, including areas of the marine environment to the west of this designation, are now being considered as for extension to the existing SPA.



Common tern. © Frank Gardiner

We are compiling recommendations for the Department for Environment, Food and Rural Affairs (Defra) to consider this proposed extension to protect breeding common terns *Sterna hirundo* and little terns *Sternula albifrons*, as they forage at sea from their colonies in areas beyond the boundaries of the existing marine SPA.

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Special Protection Areas

The Birds Directive was adopted in 1979 to tackle declines in wild bird populations across Europe. Each member state agreed to identify SPAs to protect:

- rare or vulnerable bird species from the list in Annex I of the Birds Directive; and
- other regularly occurring migratory bird species.

SPAs on land in the UK are now well established, but to provide waterbirds and seabirds with the protection they need further work is required to establish SPAs at sea. The UK Government is committed to identifying a network of SPAs in the marine environment by November 2015.

Outer Thames Estuary: an important place for seabirds

Common and little terns

The breeding tern colonies present at Foulness SPA and Minsmere to Walberswick SPA regularly support more than 1% of the Great British populations of common tern and little terns. The surrounding marine environment is an important foraging ground for these terns during their breeding season (March – September) and is encompassed largely within the Outer Thames Estuary SPA with respect to Foulness SPA and completely within the Outer Thames Estuary SPA with respect to Minsmere to Walberswick SPA.

A marine extension for foraging seabirds

All seabird species are 'central place' foragers, meaning they depart from and return to a central place (ie their nest) each time they forage. This constraint means that they have a limited foraging range and a strong energetic incentive to forage as close to their colony as they can. The surrounding marine environment around the existing SPA breeding colonies needs to be considered for protection.

The JNCC conducted a programme of survey work recording the distribution of foraging effort

by tracking large tern species at select colonies around the UK in order to provide a good evidence base on which to identify the sea areas that might be best afforded protection for the common tern. Additional work combining shore-based and sea-based surveys of the near-shore distribution of little terns was also conducted at a number of colonies around the UK.

The area under consideration extends west from the southern section of the existing Outer Thames Estuary SPA boundary up to Leigh on Sea and down the Rivers Crouch and Roach. It overlaps with some existing SPAs (Benfleet and Southend Marshes, Dengie, Crouch and Roach, Thames Estuary and Marshes and Foulness) to ensure full coverage for the foraging tern species. A map of the area under consideration for extension together with the existing boundary of the SPA can be found below.

What happens next?

Natural England is responsible for recommending SPAs in English waters (out to 12 nautical miles) to Defra for classification.

Once we have developed initial site recommendations and have held informal discussions with stakeholders, we will submit proposals (approved by our Executive Board) as formal advice to Defra.

Towards the end of 2015 or early 2016, subject to Ministerial approval, the public consultation process will commence which will last for twelve weeks. After the consultation we will consider the responses and submit our final recommendations to Defra. It is Defra's intention to have made a decision regarding the classification of the site by December 2016.

How can you get involved?

We are contacting stakeholders with an interest in the proposals from 1st July 2015 over an initial twelve week period. We would like to hear from you if:

- You wish to discuss further the scientific proposals.

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- You hold any additional bird data that you would like to share with us to inform the recommendations.
- You have any information about your interests or activities in the area that could help us determine the potential socio-economic impacts of classification.

Further Information

Natural England Technical Information Notes are available to download from the Natural England website: [Establishing Marine Special Protection Areas](#). In particular see:

- TIN120: *Establishing marine Special Protection Areas*
- TIN138: *Common tern: species information for marine Special Protection Area consultations*
- TIN139: *Little Tern: species information for marine Special Protection Area consultations*

If you want to know more

If you would like to know more about the proposals or ask any questions, please get in touch with:

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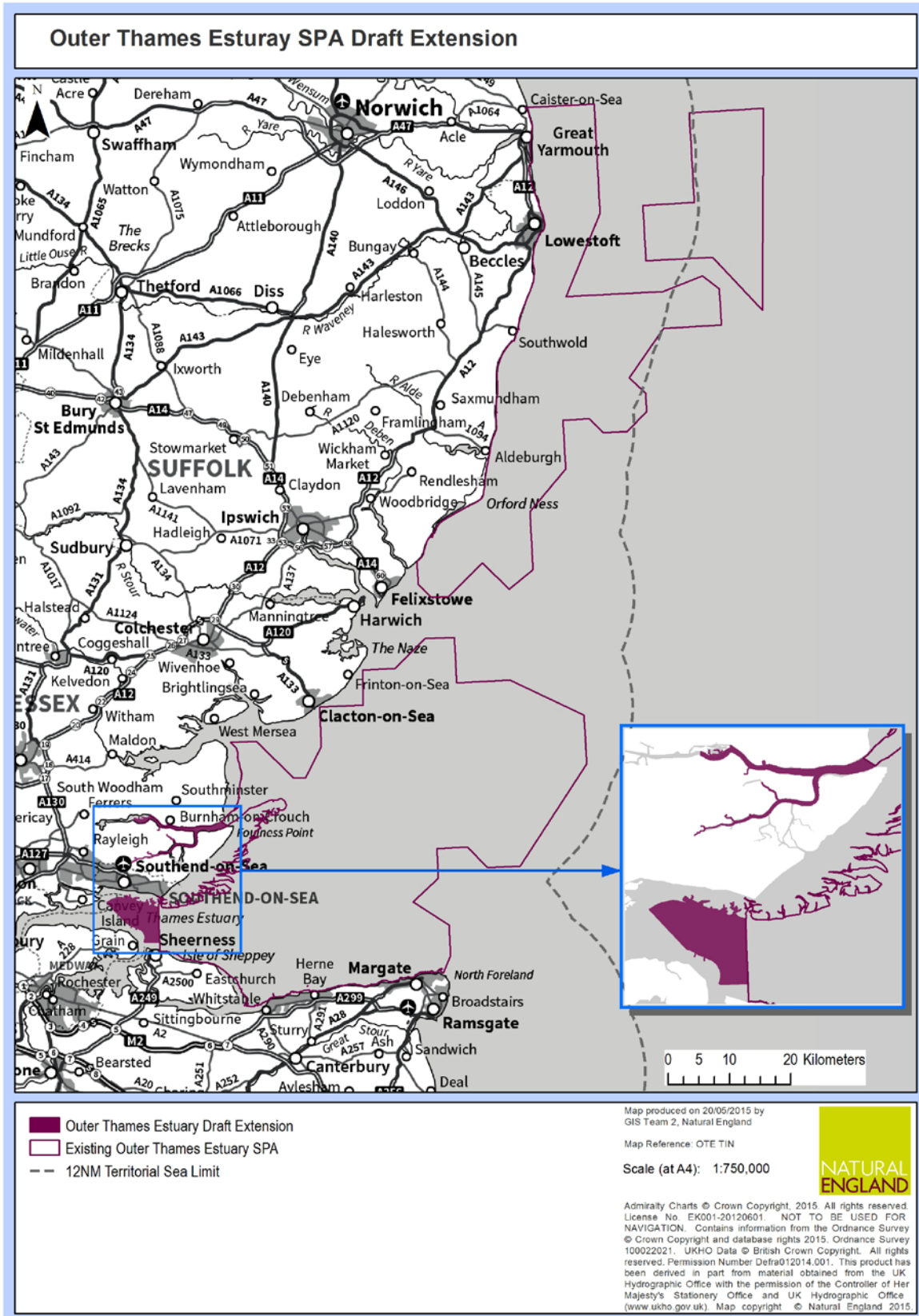
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Map showing the proposals for a Marine Extension to the Outer Thames Estuary Special Protection Area