

Natural England Standard

Conservation Objectives for European Sites in England



1:0 About this standard

Summary

This Strategic Standard sets out Natural England's general approach to setting, managing and improving its advice on Conservation Objectives for European Sites in England.

This further develops an proposed outline approach to improving the content of Conservation Objectives for terrestrial and marine Special Areas of Conservation (SACs) and Special Protection Areas (SPAs) set out by Natural England with JNCC, as recommended by the Habitats and Wild Bird Directives Implementation Review ('the HWBDIR') published in March 2012.

This Standard will apply to English European Sites on land and water and to Marine Protected Areas (MPAs) within English territorial waters.

The Standard sets out an approach based on ten key principles:

Natural England will be clearer on the meaning and purpose of European Site Conservation Objectives and will ensure that - over time – they also reflect any strategic objectives and priorities which may emerge for the national European Site network.

In the more immediate term, we will supplement the European Site Conservation Objectives with more objective and quantified advice to enable their effective and practical application by those who use them. Delivery of these improvements will be prioritised based on the risks and issues associated with each site.

European Site Conservation Objectives will be developed using a consistent and transparent format and approach based on the best available information about each site and its qualifying features. We will strive to ensure that European Site Conservation Objectives will be as accessible as possible and can be clearly understood, and will check this, and their overall effectiveness, by continuing to engage with our customers, partners and stakeholders.

Where there are cross-border European Sites and inshore marine sites, we will work closely with the other statutory nature conservation bodies in the UK to align our European Site Conservation Objectives to expedite decision-making. We will, with others, ensure they recognise and remain responsive to wider environmental changes which may occur over time.

In the future we will endeavour to ensure the revised European Site Conservation Objectives and their Supplementary Advice remain as up-to-date as possible through the continual improvement of the information and advice contained within them.

Introduction

European Site Conservation Objectives make an important contribution to delivering the requirements of the Conservation of Habitats and Species Regulations 2017 (as amended) (“The Habitats Regulations”), and the Conservation of Offshore Marine Conservation Habitats and Species Regulations 2017 (as amended). These both contribute to achieving the Government’s priorities for conserving biodiversity as set out in the England Biodiversity Strategy¹.

One of the principal requirements of the Habitats Regulations (as derived from the European Union’s Habitats and Wild Birds Directives) is the designation and protection of an ecologically-coherent network of land, water and marine habitats contained within or supported by a suite of individual sites. These designated sites, supported by features of the landscape which help to connect them with each other and improve their coherence², collectively make up a national European Site network. Prior to the UK’s EU Exit, these sites formed part of the EU’s Natura 2000 network.

There are various categories of European Site as defined by the Habitats Regulations³. European Sites comprise;

- Designated **Special Areas of Conservation** (SACs) – for specific natural habitats and species listed on Annexes I and II of the European Habitats Directive.
- Classified **Special Protection Areas** (SPAs) –for specific populations and assemblages of wild birds listed on Annex I of the European Wild Birds Directive, and for regularly-occurring migratory species.

Those SPAs and SACs which have a marine component are often referred to as ‘European marine sites’.

Formal details about each European Site, and the specific features for which each site is significant and was either designated or classified (the ‘qualifying features’), are placed on the European Sites Register⁴ by the Secretary of State and are also published by the Joint Nature Conservation Committee (JNCC)⁵.

¹ Defra. 2011. Biodiversity 2020: A strategy for England’s wildlife and ecosystem services.

² See regulation 41 of the Habitats Regulations 2017

³ A full definition of the term ‘European Site’ is given at regulation 8 of the Habitats Regulations.

⁴ For example, as required by regulation 13 of the Habitats Regulations. A copy of this Register can be viewed at Natural England’s Peterborough office.

⁵ See <http://jncc.defra.gov.uk/page-4>

What are European Site Conservation Objectives and why are they needed?

With regard to the general purpose of European Site Conservation Objectives, European Commission guidance⁶ suggests conservation objectives can generally be described as being '*the specification of the overall target for the species and/or habitat types for which a site is designated, in order for it to contribute to maintaining or reaching favourable conservation status of the habitats and species concerned at the national, the bio-geographical or the European level*'.

There are numerous and specific references to the term 'conservation objectives' in various provisions of the Habitats Regulations and the Conservation of Offshore Marine Habitats and Species Regulations 2017 (as amended)⁷. The Habitats Regulations explicitly require the relevant statutory nature conservation bodies ('SNCBs') to advise on the conservation objectives for European Marine Sites.

For SACs, site-level Conservation Objectives are required to ensure that each site makes a full contribution to the overall aim of achieving a Favourable Conservation Status (FCS) for the site's qualifying habitats and species across their natural range in the UK.

The Habitats Regulations make it clear that in order for individual SACs to contribute to the achievement of FCS, a dual approach at a site-level is to be applied. Firstly, the necessary conservation measures are to be established which maintain or where necessary restore the conservation status of each qualifying feature on each site, based on their ecological needs. Secondly, preventative measures are to be taken to avoid the deterioration of qualifying habitat features and the significant disturbance of qualifying species (), and, more specifically, to ensure an assessment is made of those new plans and projects likely to have a significant effect on SACs before they are allowed to proceed.

These provisions also apply to SPAs to support the broad aim of conserving and sustaining populations of all wild bird species at appropriate levels.

In England, advice on the Conservation Objectives for a European Site is given at the site level by the appropriate statutory nature conservation body, namely Natural England for terrestrial and inshore marine sites out to 12 nautical miles, and JNCC for offshore marine sites within English territorial waters between 12 – 200 nautical miles.

The Objectives are based on the qualifying nature conservation features for which each SAC and SPA has been specifically designated and informed by the ecological requirements of those features.

³ The European Commission. 2012. Commission Note on the Setting of Conservation Objectives for Natura 2000 Sites. Final version dated 23/11/2012 accessed via http://ec.europa.eu/environment/nature/legislation/habitatsdirective/docs/commission_note2.pdf

⁴ The Offshore Marine (Natural Habitats, &c.) Regulations 2007 (as amended)

Background to this Standard

On 29 June 2012 Natural England and JNCC jointly published a proposed outline approach⁸ to improving the content of Conservation Objectives for terrestrial and marine Special Areas of Conservation (SACs) and Special Protection Areas (SPAs) in England.

This was in response to the conclusions of the Habitats and Wild Bird Directives Implementation Review⁹ ('the Habitats Review') published by Government in March 2012. The purpose of that review was to examine how (in England) the Directives could be better implemented at that time to provide strong protection for nature whilst also minimising burdens on businesses and other affected people.

One of the Review's recommendations was that European Site Conservation Objectives '*should remain up-to-date, be easily accessible and should allow applicants to assess the impacts of their proposed development against them*'¹⁰. Measure 14 of the Habitats Review charged Natural England and JNCC with publishing and consulting on a new approach to '*increasing the information on Conservation Objectives of Protected Sites*', together with making a statement on how this would be prioritised.

This Review coincided with new guidance issued by the European Commission¹¹ at that time to further assist Member States with objective-setting on Natura 2000 Sites. This also re-iterated and endorsed the need to produce site-level Conservation Objectives in order to support the aims and provisions of the Directives, specifying that Conservation Objectives "*need to be as clear and straightforward as possible and operational in practice. They need to be specified in concrete terms and wherever possible be quantifiable in numbers and/or size.*"¹²

Natural England had already recognised the need to clarify and improve its Conservation Objectives and Marine Conservation Advice for England's terrestrial and marine European Sites. New high-level Conservation Objectives for European Sites¹³ were developed and published by Natural England in May 2012 to provide a clearer basis for Habitats Regulations Assessments ('HRAs')¹⁴ required of decision-taking authorities by the Habitats Regulations.

For inshore European Marine Sites, a project to review and revise existing statutory Conservation Advice¹⁵ (which includes both conservation objectives and advice on operations that could impact on qualifying features) also commenced during 2012.

⁸ See http://www.naturalengland.org.uk/Images/action-14-announcement_tcm6-32928.pdf

⁹ See <http://www.defra.gov.uk/publications/files/pb13724-habitats-review-report.pdf>

¹⁰ Paragraph 65, p26 of the Report of the Habitats and Wild Birds Directives Implementation Review (HM Government, March 2012)

¹¹ See footnote 8.

¹² See footnote 8.

¹³ See <http://www.naturalengland.org.uk/ourwork/conservation/designations/sac/conservationobjectives.aspx>

¹⁴ A generic term used here to conveniently and collectively describe the various stages of an assessment carried out under the Habitats Regulations.

¹⁵ Required by regulation 37 of the Habitats Regulations (formerly given under regulation 33 of the 1994 Habitats Regulations and regulation 31 under the 2010 Habitats Regulations)

What does the Standard cover?

This Strategic Standard now sets out Natural England's general approach to setting, improving and managing Conservation Objectives for European Sites in England and indicates the intended 'direction of travel' that, over time, Natural England intends to take with regard to continually improving them as part of its role as a statutory adviser on these matters.

This Standard applies to European Sites on land, water and to Marine Protected Areas (MPAs) within English territorial waters (0 - 12 nautical miles from the shore). It does not apply to MPAs in UK offshore waters (>12 nautical miles) where the Joint Nature Conservation Committee is responsible for providing advice.

The principles set out in this Standard will also be applied to candidate SACs, potential SPAs and also to listed and proposed Wetlands of International Importance designated or proposed for their wetland features under the auspices of the Convention of Wetlands of International Importance (commonly referred to as 'Ramsar sites')¹⁶.

Where it is appropriate to do so, it is envisaged that the principles developed for European Site Conservation Objectives set out in this Standard will also be applied by Natural England to new Marine Conservation Zones (MCZs) at sea out to 12 nautical miles designated under the Marine and Coastal Access Act 2009.

This Standard builds on the principles outlined in the Natural England /JNCC approach previously published in June 2012 and has been informed by the views of a broad suite of external stakeholders representing both terrestrial and marine environments.

It further defines and outlines the purpose of Conservation Objectives for European Sites in England and sets out the key principles which will underpin their ongoing development and improvement. It sets out an approach which will give added confidence and clarity that the European Site Conservation Objectives closely align with the provisions of the Habitats Regulations, and are appropriate to be used in support of these purposes.

This Standard will inform and contribute to the ongoing delivery of Natural England's Protected Sites work programme, and more specifically to the development of new standards for all Conservation Advice required for inshore Marine Protected Areas.

Who is this Standard for?

This Standard has been produced to enable Natural England staff, those organisations that may use European Site Conservation Objectives, and all those with an interest in European Sites, to clearly and confidently understand how Natural England will deliver its responsibilities regarding its advice on European Site Conservation Objectives.

¹⁶ These sites are all afforded the same level of protection as SACs and SPAs as a matter of Government policy, and the assessment provisions of the Habitats Regulations are applied to them.

The Standard will be of particular interest to regulators, advisory bodies and competent authorities who must use European Site Conservation Objectives during the decision-making process set out by the Habitats Regulations.

It is also of direct relevance to those referring to the Conservation Objectives at the early stage of scoping and designing plans and projects. It gives greater clarity on those ecological aspects of a European Site which are likely to be considered important and which should be taken into account during project design and information-gathering.

2:0 The Standard

Natural England's approach to improving and managing the advice it gives on European Site Conservation Objectives will be based on the following principles;

1. **We will be clear on the meaning and purpose of European Site Conservation Objectives as applied in England**

In line with the overall aims of the Habitats Regulations, it is important that European Site Conservation Objectives recognise that the European Site Network should support and contribute to the achievement of Favourable Conservation Status of those qualifying features present on SACs, and the equivalent aims of the Habitats Regulations in relation to those features present on SPAs.

More specifically, these Conservation Objectives must support the statutory provisions of the Habitats Regulations. In particular they must expedite the regulatory decision-making procedures required by the Habitats Regulations where European Sites are a necessary consideration. These Objectives are specifically needed by decision-taking and plan-making competent authorities¹⁷ to ensure that new plans or projects proceed without having an adverse effect on the integrity¹⁸ of a European Site unless, in the absence of alternative solutions, there are imperative reasons of overriding public interest and the necessary compensatory measures can be secured.

In addition, these Objectives will have a wider practical purpose in providing a general framework to inform any conservation measures necessary to achieve or restore as appropriate the conservation status of the qualifying features at a site level. They should also inform the selection of measures that may be necessary to prevent their deterioration and disturbance as a result of existing and ongoing activities.

Therefore, to strengthen the links between the Habitats Regulations and site-level Conservation Objectives, we will clarify that the term 'European Site Conservation Objectives' for all English European Sites (marine and terrestrial) will specifically refer to those conservation objectives cited in the provisions of the Habitats Regulations. European Site Conservation objectives will be set out within Annex 1 of this Standard.

These Objectives will be consistently applied to every SAC and SPA in England.

Each Objective will make clear that contributing to the achievement of Favourable Conservation Status of a site's features across their natural range in the UK will rely largely on maintaining, or indeed restoring where it is necessary, the critical components or elements which underpin the integrity of an individual site. These will comprise the extent and distribution of the qualifying features within the site,

¹⁷ As defined in regulation 7 of the Habitats Regulations

¹⁸ Site integrity has been defined as being 'the coherence of its ecological structure and function across its whole area which enables it to sustain the habitats, complex of habitats and/or population levels of the species for which it was classified (designated)'. Paragraph 20 of ODPM Circular 06/2005 on Biodiversity and Geological Conservation.

and the underlying structure, functions and supporting physical, chemical or biological processes¹⁹ associated with that site and which help to support and sustain its qualifying features.

The Conservation Objectives must have full regard to the ecological requirements of a site's qualifying features. Each Objective will contain a definitive list of qualifying features (comprising those listed on the Citations and Standard Data Forms for Natura 2000 sites²⁰). Each Conservation Objective will also indicate the presence of qualifying features which are also highlighted in Annex I and II of the Habitats Directive as being a particular priority for conservation at a European scale (known as 'SAC priority habitats and species').

It is not the role of European Site Conservation Objectives to identify precisely how and which attributes of a site will be regularly monitored. Natural England is already required to periodically assess the present condition of all designated site features using the UK's Common Standards Monitoring framework²¹, and some aspects of a site's integrity are regularly assessed as part of this process²². This existing approach will therefore usefully give an indication of the progress made towards achieving the European Site Conservation Objectives at a site-level.

The documents which set out how the favourable condition of each feature is defined at each designated site are provided separately (these are often referred to as 'definitions of favourable condition' or Favourable Condition Tables'). The monitoring targets these documents contain often incorporate a greater degree of variability to take into account natural population fluctuations or change, and/or margins of error resulting from methods of data collection. It is therefore important to note that monitoring documents such as FCTs are separate from, and serve a different purpose to, the European Site Conservation Objectives, although there will be a necessary and complementary link between the two.

2. We will ensure that - over time - individual European Site Conservation Objectives better reflect strategic objectives and priorities which may be set for the national European Site network

It is essential that Conservation Objectives for European Sites reflect the contribution each site makes to the achievement of the wider objectives and priorities set for the UK's European Site network.

In parallel to improving the content of site-level Conservation Objectives in the short-term, we will continue to work with other statutory bodies and stakeholders to further develop our understanding

¹⁹ The structure and function of a habitat involves a number of inter-related factors. In general terms, habitat structure can relate to a variety of biotic and abiotic features, including species composition, the physical architecture of vegetation, the ground morphology, the successional status of the vegetation, and species assemblages of plants, animals or both. Function relates to the way in which the biotic and abiotic features interact over time and may include bio-geochemical cycles, hydrology and other processes.

²⁰ See www.jncc.defra.gov.uk

²¹ Natural England's SSSI Monitoring and Reporting Standard can be accessed via <http://publications.naturalengland.org.uk/search?q=sssi+monitoring&num=100> .

²² The assessment of a feature's present condition is necessarily limited to using those attributes that are the most economic and practical to assess. These monitoring attributes are identified within site-level monitoring documents. There will usually be a wider range of attributes which will comprise and influence a site's overall integrity and which will need to be considered by a Habitats Regulations Assessment for example. For European Sites this set of attributes will be identified in the supplementary advice to the European Site Conservation Objectives as proposed in this standard.

about how Favourable Conservation Status and appropriate wild bird population levels may be defined for the natural habitats and species throughout their natural range in the UK.

When this is better understood and can be fully reflected at a site-level, we will refine the content of the Conservation Objectives which have been set for individual European Sites to better outline their contribution to these strategic aims.

3. We will produce more objective and quantified advice to supplement the European Site Conservation Objectives

Natural England recognises the value of having clearly defined and objective information to support the application and achievement of European Site Conservation Objectives. Such an approach gives a clear focus to both conservation measures and to Habitats Regulations assessments undertaken by competent authorities, and to enable project proposers and their advisers to have greater confidence in the likely data and evidence-gathering requirements with regard to European Sites and their qualifying features. Our published approach of June 2012 recognised this and set out that we would aim to produce – where it was possible to do so – ‘quantified targets’ for the various ecological attributes which are likely to underpin a site’s integrity.

As recognised in the published approach of June 2012, it is clear however that the ability to achieve this will, at present, vary significantly according to our level of knowledge of both the sites themselves, their qualifying features (and in some cases sub-features) and their supporting habitats. The ecological requirements of the features themselves may well be complex and not fully understood. Similarly the availability and quality of the evidence and information we and others have relating to European Sites and their features is variable. In many cases, it is therefore likely to take time and require further resources to achieve this aim across all European sites.

However Natural England recognises the need to make early progress towards this standard. Using our current level of knowledge and understanding, we will satisfy the recommendation of the Habitats Review (Measure 14) to improve the information associated with European Site Conservation Objectives by providing further **Supplementary Advice**. With the aim of better enabling the use and delivery of the Objectives, this advice will comprise;

- a more comprehensive description of each site’s ecological **attributes**, and,
- a clear **target** or targets for each attribute.

The structure of this advice will be the same across all European Site Conservation Objectives in England and the same attributes will normally be applied to sites which support the same qualifying features.

The detailed attributes will be drawn from qualifying feature-based frameworks compiled by our national specialists. The selection of these attributes will be underpinned by best available evidence and informed by Natural England’s expert judgement where appropriate. Although not necessarily exhaustive, the list of these attributes will strive to be as comprehensive as possible.

The targets given for the attributes identified within the advice will describe the contribution each attribute should, in Natural England’s opinion, make in order to support the overall achievement of the European Site Conservation Objectives. Where these targets are being met, the site can be said to

demonstrate a high degree of integrity and will be contributing to the achievement of the wider aims of the Habitats Regulations.

As far as possible these targets will reflect local site circumstances and characteristics and will be realistic in terms of their scientific and ecological achievability. Where appropriate, site-level targets will draw on any agreed or aligned national standards. Similarly, not all targets will be routinely monitored; existing methods of site-based monitoring using suitable 'indicators' will be adopted as highlighted above.

In providing this integrity-based Supplementary Advice we will apply the following principles;

- We will support attributes with targets which are quantified as far as practicable (for example, by indicating any tolerances, standards, thresholds or limits of acceptable change) where there is robust supporting evidence to do so (such as meeting our published evidence standards²³ or being ratified by our national technical experts) and where it is readily applicable at an individual site-level
- Where we currently do not have the required quality of evidence, or it is not appropriate to give quantified targets, we will provide a target which is more qualitative in nature and which necessarily reflects the precautionary approach to decision-making to be taken by competent authorities as required by the Habitats Regulations

Our intention is that the Supplementary Advice to the European Site Conservation Objectives will add value by;

- providing a more comprehensive basis for 'scoping advice²⁴' to help shape and give focus to screening and appropriate assessments much earlier in the process, thereby helping decision-makers to quickly process those proposals which are clearly not capable of having any effects on a site,
- increasing the transparency and clarity on the likely evidence that may be needed so that Natural England can give its formal advice, and,
- giving a clearer and more consistent framework on which competent authorities, project proposers and their advisers can prepare for and undertake the assessment of the effects of plans and projects against the integrity of a European Site.

The Supplementary Advice to the Conservation Objectives will also form the basis of Natural England's initial views regarding those attributes considered to be most important to a site's integrity. This will be provided without prejudice to more detailed advice which is given by Natural England in its role as a statutory consultee and adviser to assist the detailed consideration and assessment of specific activities, plans and projects.

²³ Natural England Standard: Evidence Strategic Standard, 2013 available at <http://publications.naturalengland.org.uk/publication/7699291?category=3769710>

²⁴ Scoping can be defined as the process of determining the content and extent of matters that should be covered by the environmental information to be submitted to a competent authority or other decision making body (see CIEEM 2006. Guidelines for Ecological Impact Assessment in the UK at, <http://www.cieem.net/ecia-guidelines-terrestrial>).

4. We will ensure European Site Conservation Objectives are developed using the best available evidence and take further action to address any shortfalls in that evidence

The published approach of June 2012 set out our intention to publish clear reasons as to why and where there are gaps in evidence we hold and how significant gaps might be resolved.

To begin to address this, the advice contained within updated European Site Conservation Objectives will clearly identify the local sources of evidence which have been used in formulating any targets and where more quantified information has been included, and therefore where further evidence is ideally required at a site-level.

The process of reviewing the best available evidence to develop national guidance to support the setting of site-level objectives will also help to identify any significant gaps in our technical evidence. This process will inform the future assessment of evidence -gathering priorities by Natural England and others, which can benefit the content of site-level Conservation Objectives in the longer-term.

The published approach of June 2012 also outlined our aim to support the Conservation Objectives with spatial information relating to the distribution of qualifying features and where we have not already done so. Where European Site Conservation Objectives can be supported by site-specific spatial information, we will aim to make this available either online or through written request, as long as the protection and conservation of sensitive qualifying features will not be undermined.

5. We will strive to ensure that European Site Conservation Objectives will be as accessible as possible and can be clearly understood

The Conservation Objectives for European Sites in England are already available on-line and as paper versions and will remain so. We will ensure they are well signposted and easily found on-line and the format and content is as user-friendly as far as is practicable subject to technical constraints.

Recognising that this will be by necessity very technical in nature, we will strive to ensure the information provided as supplementary advice to the Conservation Objectives can be understood as far as practicable by a non-technical audience by providing supporting explanation, avoiding jargon and where appropriate providing glossaries of any technical terms used.

Our long-term goal will be to ensure all information pertaining to European Sites in England (including their Conservation Objectives, statutory advice, designation documents, supporting maps, science and evidence) is clearly linked, and is as readily and easily available as possible.

6. We will regularly engage with our customers and stakeholders to improve the operational effectiveness of European Site Conservation Objectives.

The development of this Standard has been informed by the views of a wide cross section of terrestrial and marine stakeholders. It is important that as the advice provided to enable the use of the European Site Conservation Objectives is improved, they continue to meet the needs of those who use them most.

As the European Site Conservation Objectives and their Supplementary Advice are intended to provide a basis for our advice, it is important that decision-makers, owners, occupiers and users of European Sites understand why and how these objectives for sites have been set and what this may mean for them.

Whilst we envisage that the European Site Conservation Objectives as set out in Annex 1 will themselves be stable into the longer-term, we will continue to keep under review the more detailed aspects of the Supplementary Advice, and look to improving its accessibility taking account of feedback on it from a wide range of stakeholders.

7. We will work closely with the other statutory nature conservation bodies in the UK to align our approaches to European Site Conservation Objectives for cross-border European Sites and inshore marine sites

We recognise that in some cases the boundaries of European Sites will straddle the national borders of England, Wales, Scotland and Northern Ireland where there will be different SNCBs. In these situations there will be different sets of European Site Conservation Objectives available, even though there is overall UK level responsibility to ensuring the necessary compliance with the Directives.

Although these Conservation Objectives may be expressed differently depending on their evolution in view of national policy, it is likely that in practice they will be highly complementary because they serve a similar purpose and seek to achieve the same outcomes for European Sites. However, to expedite decision-making at a local level, it will be important for Natural England and the SNCBs to be clear to others as to the relevant European Site Conservation Objectives for use and consideration.

We will therefore continue to explore with our fellow SNCBs and others how we can work together and improve the presentation of the advice provided by European Site Conservation Objectives for cross-border sites in the most effective and efficient way.

8. We will adopt a risk-based approach to prioritise the improvement of European Site Conservation Objectives

The published approach of June 2012 outlined that we would make early improvements to European Site Conservation Objectives for those sites where development pressure was most acute and where prompt decision-making would be needed in the short-term. In such cases the addition of more information to these European Site Conservation Objectives will further support evidence-gathering and assessment to inform the decision-making process in a more timely way.

Further improvements to European Site Conservation Objectives by the provision of Supplementary Advice in line with this Standard will therefore commence to a timetable closely aligned with Government priorities for decision-making. These may include for example, a focus on nationally important infrastructure projects (where Natural England will already be engaged in this process as a statutory consultee) and sites requiring new fisheries management measures. By working closely with the Government's Major Infrastructure and Environment Unit (MIEU) our work on Conservation Objectives will be firmly integrated with this process to facilitate the necessary decision-making procedures.

Natural England will also prioritise the improvement of European Site Conservation Objectives for those sites where there is or likely to be a significant, complex and/or pressing volume of casework and where improving the content of European Site Conservation Objectives as soon as practicable would be particularly beneficial to stakeholders.

9. We will ensure the European Site Conservation Objectives and their Supplementary Advice remain as up-to-date as possible through the ‘continual improvement’ of the information and advice contained within them.

Maintaining the content of Conservation Objectives and their Supplementary Advice to make sure the information and advice they provide is as current and as up to date as possible has to be a sustained process which will require ongoing investment. This is critical to not only facilitating an objective and rigorous assessment and decision-making process, but also to ensuring the current status of the qualifying features of European Sites is fully and properly taken account of.

Whilst we envisage that the European Site Conservation Objectives as set out in Annex 1 will themselves be unchanged, in order to meet this standard the supporting detail and information provided as supplementary advice to the Objectives is expected to be subject to periodic review by Natural England. The circumstances when we may do this might include for example, a formal change to the underpinning legal designation of a European Site, or improvements to the best available scientific knowledge and evidence relating to a particular site or a qualifying feature. Similarly, a review may be triggered by an improved understanding of Favourable Conservation Status for features at an UK level as referred to in Principle 2 of this Standard.

Where such amendments have been made, we will clearly record why, when and how the content of a European Site Conservation Objective has been updated as an integral part of the documents.

10. We will ensure European Site Conservation Objectives remain responsive to wider environmental change

European Sites are part of naturally dynamic ecosystems which change in response to environmental influences. For example, natural physical change is a particularly notable feature of coastal sites and river systems. The longer term complex effects of climate change are also likely to have significant impacts on European Sites. Changing economic and social factors can influence wider land use patterns and consequently threaten to impact on the overall coherence of the network and the fabric of individual sites. The interaction between habitats and species, and their response to such environmental change, will require greater understanding.

All Conservation Objectives are therefore necessarily set against a background of such changes. This is currently described by the term ‘subject to natural change’. This recognises that there are European Sites and their wildlife which will be influenced and modified by unforeseen or unpredictable natural forces, events or processes which cannot be effectively prevented, avoided or managed at an individual site-level. Where such a change occurs and has to be accepted, a site will not be judged to have failed its conservation objectives but the change may trigger their adaptation to take account of the change accordingly.

Where this information is available it should form a key part of the context which is taken account of and allowed for when considering a site’s Conservation Objectives.

Implementation

The next steps Natural England will take towards implementing this Standard are set out in Annex 2.

Following further scoping of the work required to update the Conservation Objectives for European Sites, and Conservation Advice packages for Marine Protected Areas, we will now aim to develop and produce updated Conservation Objective documents for all European Sites from early 2014 onwards.

We will ensure that the programme of delivery remains flexible and sites can continue to be prioritised on the basis of development pressures and other relevant factors.

Annex 1: Amended European Site Conservation Objectives for England

SACs

With regard to the SAC and the natural habitats and/or species for which the site has been designated (the 'Qualifying Features' listed below), and subject to natural change;

Ensure that the integrity of the site is maintained or restored as appropriate, and ensure that the site contributes to achieving the Favourable Conservation Status of its qualifying features, by maintaining or restoring;

[For Qualifying Habitats]

- The extent and distribution of qualifying habitats
- The structure and function (including typical species) of qualifying habitats, and
- The supporting processes on which qualifying habitats rely.

[For Qualifying Species]

- The extent and distribution of habitats of qualifying species
- The structure and function of habitats of qualifying species
- The supporting processes on which habitats of qualifying species rely
- The populations of qualifying species, and
- The distribution of qualifying species within the site.

This document should be read in conjunction with the accompanying Supplementary Advice document, which provides more detailed advice and information to enable the application and achievement of the Objectives set out above.

Qualifying features: [List]

SPAs

With regard to the SPA and the individual species and/or assemblage of species for which the site has been classified (the 'Qualifying Features' listed below) and subject to natural change;

Ensure that the integrity of the site is maintained or restored as appropriate, and to ensure that the site contributes to achieving the aims of the Wild Birds Directive, by maintaining or restoring,

- The extent and distribution of the habitats of the qualifying features
- The structure and function of the habitats of the qualifying features
- The supporting processes on which the habitats of the qualifying features rely
- The populations of each of the qualifying features, and
- The distribution of the qualifying features within the site.

This document should be read in conjunction with the accompanying Supplementary Advice document, which provides more detailed advice and information to enable the application and achievement of the Objectives set out above.
Qualifying Features: [List]

Annex 2: Implementing the Standard: next steps	
Principle contained within the Standard	Next Steps
1	The existing Conservation Objectives will be revised to take account of stakeholder feedback and new EU guidance. For both terrestrial and marine sites, amended Objectives will be produced from 2014 onwards and re-published alongside new Supplementary Advice.
2	Natural England will work with others and undertake further developmental work to progress towards a shared definition of Favourable Conservation Status (FCS) and appropriate wild bird population levels for European features at a UK level.
3	From 2014 onwards, we will begin to add Supplementary Advice in the form of relevant attributes and targets to each European Site Conservation Objective and publish these updated versions. In the interim we will continue to provide our advice on necessary conservation measures and specific plans and projects and the application of Conservation Objectives on a case by case basis and in the usual way.
4	We will explore ways in which we can proactively make spatial information more accessible, especially more specific information relating to the designated boundary of a site and to the extent and distribution of its qualifying features and supporting habitats. This will be done in conjunction with other initiatives to improve the quality, quantity and availability of evidence and data.
5	We will continue to engage with and take advice from our stakeholders and customers as to how we can continue to improve the accessibility, use and understanding of European Site Conservation Objectives.
6	We will continue to openly engage with our partners and stakeholders using a wide range of methods, which may include face to face stakeholder panels, existing fora or informal web-based opportunities to comment and feedback.
7	We will work together with other SNCBs to develop a clear and agreed way of aligning our advice on European Site Conservation Objectives for cross-border and inshore marine sites, so these will be clear to stakeholders and can avoid unnecessary delays to the Habitats regulations assessments being made by competent authorities.

8	We will generate a list of European terrestrial and marine sites where the improvement of Conservation Objectives will be a priority for delivery. This will be based on a clear set of criteria. This list will be kept under review to allow for future changes in priorities.
9	We will publish a final version of this Standard in early 2014 and formally review the approach outlined within it during 2017.
10	We will explore in conjunction with fellow SNCBs and others what we collectively mean by the term ' <i>subject to natural change</i> '. Natural England will aim to produce and publish a joint statement on the term in order to give improved context to the use of European Site Conservation Objectives.

3:0 Sign off

The standard

The compliance monitoring plan

Implementation plan

The Equality Impact Assessment

Director

Signature*

Print name

Director

Signature*

Print name

Director

Signature*

Print name

*Can be electronic

Quick reference

Type of Standard	Strategic standard.
Purpose:	Natural England's approach to setting and improving the content of Conservation Objectives for European Sites in England
Owner(s):	Caroline Cotterell (Director, Strategy Implementation)
Sign-off:	Samantha Somers (Manager of the Strategy to Delivery Team) Christina Cork (Principle Specialist)
Publication:	Standards library: External version
Review date:	April 2020

Document Amendment Record			
Issue	Amendment detail	Author	Date
0.1	First draft in Standards template, building on scoping document	Steve Clifton	14.12.2012
0.2	Second draft to reflect amendments suggested by Caroline Cotterell and Chris Davis, to reflect internal discussion on quantification and amendments suggested by Jonathan Blowers (Landscape and Biodiversity) and Debbie Russell (Evidence)	Steve Clifton	25.2.2013
0.3	Third draft to take account of external stakeholder comments arising from the NE/JNCC invitation to comment exercise (8 December -31 January 2013)	Steve Clifton	01.03.2013
0.4	Amended in light of comments from CCW (13.3.13) and external stakeholders on NE MPA Conservation Advice Advisory Group (15.3.13)	Steve Clifton	16.03.13
0.5	Amended in light of internal comment from D Russell (Evidence), C Davis, F McNie (Marine), R Leishman (Regulation)	Steve Clifton	15.04.13
0.6	Amended in light of further comments from Defra (19.4.13) and representatives of external terrestrial stakeholder advisory group (26.4.13)	Steve Clifton	9.05. 2013
0.7	Amended in light of further comments from C Cork and C Cotterell (16.6.2013); document owners sign-off confirmed.	Steve Clifton	21.06.2013.
0.8	Minor amendments in light of approval by A Wood (1.7.2013), J Ward (4.7.2013), T Hill (4.7.2013), A Law (8.7.2013) and M Jago (8.7.2013)	Steve Clifton	8 .7.2013
0.9	Minor amendments made as part of sign-off as a standard by K Roy (16.7.2013)	Steve Clifton	16.7.2013
0.10	Amendments to improve clarity to published draft following consultation responses from	Steve Clifton	24.12.2013

	JNCC, Defra, RSPB, National Farmers Union and the Wildlife Trusts, and following sign-off from NE Project Board and document owners; Summary added.		
1.0	Final edits and approval of final version by Rob Cooke (for Andrew Wood) and Ken Roy.	Steve Clifton	31.01.2014
1.1	Amendments to ensure that the Standard will be compliant with operability changes made to the Habitats Regulations in April 2019.	Richard Leishman Steve Clifton	07.02.2019
1.2	Sign Off	Samantha Somers Christina Cork	19.03.2019
1.3	Reformatting of text, and update of the Quick Reference and Document Amendment Record	Richard Leishman	02.04.2019