



Report To The Senedd Cymru | Welsh Parliament On The Marine Protected Areas (MPAs) In Wales

February 2025

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EXECUTIVE SUMMARY

This document is the Welsh Government's report to the Senedd in accordance with Section 124 of the Marine and Coastal Access Act 2009 (MCAA: <https://www.legislation.gov.uk/ukpga/2009/23/part/5/chapter/1/crossheading/duties-relating-to-network>).

Section 123(2) of the MCAA requires the Welsh Ministers to designate Marine Conservation Zones (MCZs) which, together with any other MCZs, Special Areas of Conservation (SACs), Special Protection Areas (SPAs) (European Marine Sites), Sites of Special Scientific Interest (SSSIs) and Ramsar sites, form a network across the UK marine area. The network is required to:

- Contribute to the conservation or improvement of the marine environment in the UK marine area,
- Represent the range of features present in the UK marine area,
- Reflect the fact that the conservation of a feature may require the designation of more than one site.

Section 124 of MCAA requires the Welsh Ministers to lay a report before the Senedd every six years to set out the extent to which the objectives of Section 123(2) have been met, and any further steps which are required to be taken in order to contribute to the achievement of the objectives of Section 123(2). As such, the Welsh Government has a number of national and international obligations (see section 1.2 1.2 National and international legislative obligations) to protect, conserve and restore, where possible, the range of species, habitats and ecological processes found within the marine environment whilst supporting the sustainable use of our seas.

Wales currently has management plans in place to prevent human activities such as fishing, construction and extraction of marine resources from damaging features within the Marine Protected Area (MPA) network. Since the last reporting period, further governance, management, monitoring, pilot studies and educational outreach have been implemented to help develop our understanding of features and species and to encourage the public to work and live harmoniously with Welsh MPA's (see section 2.3 Management of the MPA Network).

Wales' Statutory Nature Conservation Body, Natural Resources Wales, is currently analysing the status and condition of designated features and species within the Welsh MPA network. This will enable us to understand the performance of the network including the percentage of areas that are in favourable condition. The condition assessment will be available Summer 2025.

The Welsh Government continues to implement and assess management measures for improving the MPA network conservation status.

PART 1. BACKGROUND

1.1 REPORTING OBLIGATIONS

Section 124 of MCAA requires the Welsh Ministers to lay a report before the Senedd every six years to set out:

- The extent to which, in the opinion of the authority, the objective in Section 123(2) has been achieved.
- Further steps which, in the opinion of the authority, are required to be taken in order to contribute to the achievement of that objective (See section 2.5.2 Further work required to meet section 123(2)).
- The number of MCZs which the authority has designated during the relevant period (see section 2.5.1 MCZ designations under section 124 of MCAA) including:
 - The size of the MCZ.
 - The conservation objectives of the MCZ.
- The number of MCZs designated by the authority in which the following activities are prohibited or significantly restricted (See section 2.5.1):
 - Any licensable marine activity.
 - Fishing for or taking animals or plants from the sea.
- Information about any amendments which the authority has made to any orders made under Section 116 (See section 2.5 Assessment of achievement of section 123(2) of MCAA).
- The extent to which, in the opinion of the authority, the conservation objectives stated for each MCZ which it has designated have been achieved.
- Any further steps which, in the opinion of the authority, are required to be taken in relation to any MCZ in order to achieve the conservation objectives stated for it.
- For the purposes of complying with its duty under this section, the appropriate authority for any area may direct the appropriate statutory conservation body for that area to carry out such monitoring of MCZs in that area as is specified in the direction.

This report is the fourth report to the Senedd. It covers progress made in Welsh inshore and offshore waters between January 2019 and December 2024.

In 2018, the nature conservation powers for the Welsh offshore region (12 to 200 nautical miles) were transferred from the Secretary of State to the Welsh Ministers. Therefore, this report also provides updates on Croker Carbonate Slab SAC and North Anglesey Marine SAC which both exist in the Welsh Offshore.

Previous reports to the Senedd include:

[Report to the National Assembly for Wales on Progress with Marine Protected Areas in Wales and Their Contribution to a Network of Marine Protected Areas \(2012\)](#)

[Report to the National Assembly for Wales on Marine Protected Areas in Wales \(2014\)](#)

1.2 NATIONAL AND INTERNATIONAL LEGISLATIVE OBLIGATIONS

The Welsh Government, and the UK as a whole, have a number of national and international obligations to protect the marine environment and its biodiversity. The national and international obligations listed below include the establishment of a network of Marine Protected Areas (MPAs), which protects, conserves and restores where possible, the range of species, habitats and ecological processes found within the marine environment whilst supporting the sustainable use of our seas.

1.2.1 National obligations

The Wildlife and Countryside Act 1981 protects animals, plants and habitats in the UK and provides for the designation of Sites of Special Scientific Interest.

The Marine and Coastal Access Act (2009) places a duty on the Welsh Ministers to form a network of sites, which contribute towards the conservation and improvement of the marine environment in the UK.

The Well-being of Future Generations Act 2015 aims to improve the social, economic, environmental and cultural well-being of Wales. It sets out seven wellbeing goals for the Wales we want, the goals include a Wales which is globally responsible and resilient.

The Environment (Wales) Act 2016 sets out Wales' approach to planning and managing natural resources at a national and local level in line with the principles of the sustainable management of natural resources. It also places a duty on public authorities to seek to maintain and enhance biodiversity and promote the resilience of ecosystems.

The UK Marine Strategy (MSFD) requires Member States to put in place measures to achieve or maintain Good Environmental Status (GES) in their seas by 2020. A network of MPAs will be a key tool in contributing to the achievement of GES.

The Conservation of Habitats and Species Regulations 2017 and The Conservation of Offshore Marine Habitats and Species Regulations 2017 provide for the establishment of Special Areas of Conservation and Special Protection Areas.

UK Biodiversity Framework (UKBF) 2024 sets out shared objectives for co-operation and collaboration across the four countries of the UK. It supports the development of Nature Recovery Networks which aim to link MPAs and other protected areas ensuring connectivity.

UK Marine Policy Statement provides a framework for marine planning. It requires marine plan authorities and decision makers to take account of how developments may impact on the UK's aim to halt biodiversity loss and the legal obligations relating to MPAs, their conservation objectives, and management.

Wales National Marine Plan 2019 sets out a plan for the sustainable use and development of Welsh inshore and offshore marine environments. The plan helps shape and guide decision making and licence applications regarding marine development proposals and is adopted under the Marine and Coastal Access Act (MCAA).

1.2.2 International obligations

The Ramsar Convention on Wetlands of International Importance 1971 aims to conserve wetlands to support their sustainable use.

The High Seas Treaty (BBNJ Agreement) sets up a procedure to establish large-scale marine protected areas in international waters. This facilitates the achievement of the target to effectively conserve and manage 30% of land and sea by 2030, which was agreed in December 2022 within the Kunming-Montreal Global Biodiversity Framework.

The Convention on Biological Diversity requires parties to the convention to establish and maintain representative and effectively managed marine protected areas that contribute towards a global network of protected areas.

The Kunming-Montreal Global Biodiversity Framework adopted at COP15, this framework sets global biodiversity targets including the goal to protect 30% of land and sea by 2030 (known as the 30 by 30 target) through ecologically representative, well-connected and equitably governed systems of protected areas and other effective area-based conservation measures.

The Oslo and Paris Convention (OSPAR) aims to protect the marine environment of the North-East Atlantic. One of the tools to achieve this is the establishment of an ecologically coherent well-managed network of marine protected areas.

The Bern Convention aims to conserve and protect wild plant and animal species and their natural habitats and seeks to establish the Emerald Network, an ecological network made up of Areas of Special Conservation Interest.

1.3 WELSH MARINE PROTECTED AREAS AND CONSERVATION ZONE

The Welsh MPA network, which consists of 139 MPAs, when taken together form a network around Wales. They make a substantial contribution towards an ecologically coherent network of MPAs in the UK and a wider network of sites in the North-East Atlantic established by the OSPAR Commission. They also incorporate ecologically valuable habitats and species which are unique to Wales. The aim of the Welsh MPA network is to:

- represent the range of habitats and species in the UK marine area, including:
 - wild birds that are listed as rare and vulnerable in the Birds Directive such as Osprey and Manx Shearwaters.

- habitats and wildlife species named in the EC Habitats Directive such as otter, shad, lamprey, grey seals, harbour porpoise and bottlenose dolphin.
- species and habitats of national and international importance, such as grey seal, pink seafan, sponge communities, eelgrass and algal communities.
- protect enough areas with protected features to provide resilience.
- protect an appropriate amount of each broad habitat feature.
- provide connections between areas.
- is appropriately managed to contribute to the conservation or improvement of the marine environment.

The 139 sites in Welsh waters (Figure 1) consist of 107 Sites of Special Scientific Interest (SSSIs), 15 Special Areas of Conservation (SACs), 13 Special Protection Areas (SPAs), three Ramsar sites and one Marine Conservation Zone (MCZs) spread out across the Welsh Marine Zone.

Individual MPAs are designated under a range of different legislation. Annex A sets out the type of MPA, what they protect, and the relevant legislation or convention used to designate them.

The network of Marine Protected Areas in Wales

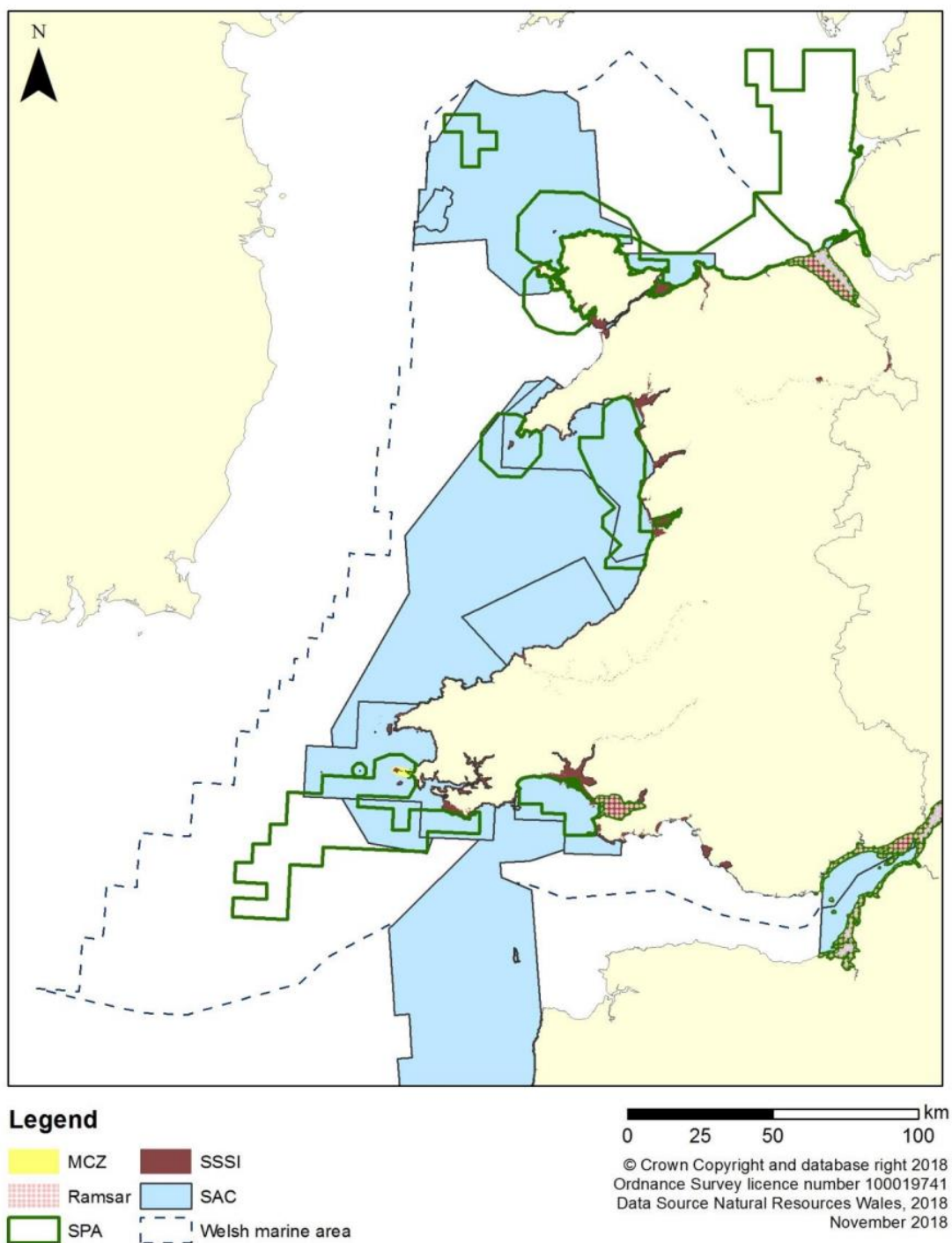


Figure 1. A map of the current MPAs in Welsh waters (source: [report-on-marine-protected-areas-mpas-2019.pdf](#))

1.4 THE IMPORTANCE OF A MPA NETWORK IN THE WELSH MARINE ZONE

The Welsh coastline is estimated to be 1,680 miles long and consists of a variety of habitats, including cliffs of varying geology, islands, estuaries, dune systems and salt marshes. The Welsh Marine zone stretches from the coast out to the median line with Ireland, Isle of Man and England and encompasses 139 Marine Protected Areas (MPAs; any defined area of sea and/or shoreline which is protected by conservation law due to its containing features of special ecological value). Welsh MPAs cover 69% of inshore waters (out to 12 nautical miles) and 50% of all Welsh waters.

MPAs are important for conserving and improving the marine environment and provide benefits to marine biodiversity, society and the economy. A MPA network is a system of individual MPAs which increase connectivity and work collectively at varying spatial scales to protect its special ecological features. A well designed and managed network of MPAs improves resilience in the marine environment and, also provide numerous benefits to marine biodiversity, society and our economy which include, but are not limited to:

- Conservation and enhancement of biological diversity, which builds ecosystem resilience. Building resilience is now more important than ever with the impacts of climate change driving unprecedented and accelerated pressures on the marine environment such as rising temperatures, acidification and extreme weather events.
- Sustainable fisheries by protecting certain habitats, which may be important for key life cycle stages, including spawning or nursery grounds and major feeding grounds of commercially important species.
- Connecting local communities to nature and supporting, through job creation, personal well-being, energy security and by providing opportunities for nature-based tourism and leisure activities.
- Opportunities for education, training and research, inspiring future generations and building a shared sense of ownership of our oceans.

An MPA network is required under the UK Marine Strategy and is, under The Kunming-Montreal Global Biodiversity Framework, essential in achieving 30 by 30 [targets](#).

PART 2. CURRENT STATE OF THE MARINE PROTECTED AREA NETWORK

2.1 WELSH MPA NETWORK CONTRIBUTION TO MARINE CONSERVATION

The Welsh Government, and its subsidiaries, have worked continuously since the last reporting period to ensure that the Welsh MPA network continues to contribute to marine conservation within UK waters as a whole.

The MPA network assessment, which was reviewed in 2019, concluded that MPAs in Wales are making a substantial contribution towards ecological coherence in that they represent the majority of habitats and species, where possible, replicate features to provide resilience; and are well connected.

Since, measures have been implemented to monitor and improve both the governance and protection of MPAs within the Welsh Marine Zone.

2.2 IDENTIFIED MPA NETWORK FEATURES

An assessment of the network in Wales completed by the JNCC in 2016 concluded sites are well connected with the majority of habitats and species represented and, where possible, replicated to provide resilience in the network. However, the assessment also identified a small number of shortfalls in protection of some features in the Welsh contribution to the UK network. Shortfalls included sediment habitats which have 10% of their area protected. This is below the minimum 20% area as recommended by the OSPAR Commission. A list of the shortfalls is detailed in Annex B: Shortfalls in the Welsh contribution to the UK network.

As a result of the identified shortfalls, the features are being considered for MCZ identification as part of the MPA completion project. The features include:

- Subtidal coarse sediment
- Subtidal sand
- Subtidal mud
- Subtidal mixed sediment
- Fragile sponge and anthozoan communities on subtidal rocky habitat
- Mud habitats in deep water
- Sea-pen and burrowing megafauna communities
- Ross worm reefs
- Ocean quahog (*Arctica islandica*)
- Pink sea-fan (*Eunicella verrucosa*)

The JNCC MPA assessment can be found here:

<https://data.jncc.gov.uk/data/7094b9f1-2b09-4eb7-8866-05b3ee9900ab/JNCC-NetworkProgressWelshWaters-Final.pdf>

2.3 MANAGEMENT OF THE MPA NETWORK

In 2014 the Welsh Government established the MPA Management Steering Group. The Group brings together representatives from the main management authorities in Wales to work towards a shared vision, agreed objectives and management principles. The MPA Management Steering Group aims to secure effective management of the MPA network, which ultimately improves its condition, safeguarding marine biodiversity, the wider ecosystem and socioeconomic benefits for Wales.

Further details on the role of the Steering Group can be found here:

<https://www.gov.wales/marine-protected-area-management-steering-group/terms-of-reference>

In 2018, the MPA Network Management Framework for Wales 2018-2023 was published. The Framework sets out current and future management plans to improve the condition of the network. It explains that the main tool for managing the network is through the well-established regulatory system, which includes the marine licensing process (currently under consultation) and fisheries management. It also highlights the work already underway to improve the management and condition of the network and its protected features.

A copy of the MPA Network Management Framework for Wales 2018-2023 can be found here:

<https://www.gov.wales/sites/default/files/publications/2018-10/marine-protected-areas-network-management-framework-for-wales-2018-2023.pdf>

The MPA Network Management Framework 2024-2029 is currently being reviewed.

Between 2019 and 2024 the MPA Steering Group selected and scored network-level actions for delivery. Actions were reevaluated each year, with 23 priority actions being put forwards for 2022-2023. The actions were assessed against the five agreed prioritisation criteria (Strategic Planning; Regulation, Development consenting and Assessment processes; Management advice and guidance; Understanding the condition of, and pressures and threats on sites and their features to inform management; and Wider management) as set out in the MPA Network Management Framework and, thus reflect the range of daily MPA management and more unique inimitable projects, including some pilot projects. The identified actions included:

Strategies and initiatives:

- Integrate sustainable management of the MPA network with the Area Statement Process and delivery.
- Develop consistent and proportionate guidance to improve casework advice, and to support implementation of the Welsh National Marine Plan 8 - Deliver MPA management through regulatory consenting and assessment processes.
- Improve maps of the extent and distribution of Annex I marine habitats.

- Maintain links between the MPA Network Management Action Plan and locally agreed actions, where they exist, and support exploration of funding opportunities.
- Address coastal squeeze impacts on MPAs.
- A Wales-wide approach to reducing recreational disturbance including a review of the effectiveness of targeted social media campaigns and the development of a long-term vision and action plan.
- Assess and where necessary manage the impact of commercial fishing activities on MPAs and operate a risk-based approach to fisheries enforcement.
- Reduce disturbance to marine mammals and birds.
- Develop a bio-security plan for marine Invasive Non-Natives Species (INNS).
- Develop a UK Cetacean Conservation Strategy.
- UK Bycatch Mitigation Initiative.
- Deliver the priority actions within the Marine Litter Action Plan where they provide benefit to the network of MPAs in Wales.

Programmes of work:

- Further, develop a risk based marine monitoring programme across the MPA network.
- MPA Network Condition Improvement Programme.
- UK Seabird Island Biosecurity Programme (SIBP).
- NRW's Marine Nature Networks Programme.

Specific projects:

- Investigating the impact of landfill sites at the coast on MPA Features.
- Feature improvement development project.
- Community Litter Project.
- Wales Native Oyster Restoration Project.
- National Shoresearch Project.

The actions were prioritised to improve MPA management, ensuring a maintained condition or improvement of the Welsh MPA network.

Reports can be found here:

[Marine Protected Area \(MPA\) Network Management Annual Report 2019-2020](#)

[Marine Protected Area \(MPA\) Network Management Annual Report 2020-2021](#)

[Marine Protected Area \(MPA\) Network Management Annual Report 2021-2022](#)

[Marine Protected Area Network Management Action Plan for Wales 2022-2023](#)

2.3.1. Management achievements

Achievements in MPA Network Management between 2019 and 2024 include, but were not limited to, the initiation of native oyster restoration within the Pembrokeshire Marine SAC; the initiation of seagrass restoration within the Pen Llŷn a'r Sarnau and Pembrokeshire Marine SACs; the introduction of preventative measures against seal pup disturbance (including signs, Figure 3); the progression of the Eco-schools programme as a part of the Marine Litter Action Plan and the development of an invasive and non-native species (INNS) biosecurity plan for the Pen Llŷn a'r Sarnau (PLAS) SAC. Some specific examples of achievements are shown below.

2.3.1.2. Native oyster restoration within the Pembrokeshire Marine SAC

The Native Oyster Restoration project within the Pembrokeshire SAC is a pilot study to assess feasibility of native oyster (*Ostrea edulis*) restoration across Wales. The pilot is needed to understand oyster survivability, recruitment, stocking density, effects of the oyster disease Bonamia and the non-native species *Crepidula fornicata* (Slipper Limpet), as well as monitoring potential positive effects including habitat enhancement and increased associated species composition. Research was undertaken showing that native oyster survival was possible, with highest survival rates in elevated, intertidal cages, with growth was greatest in one subtidal area, and oyster spat settlement in an intertidal region of one location. The information gathered will assist the recovery and restoration of oysters in other Welsh regions.



Figure 2. Native oyster restoration within the Milford Haven area. Image source Pembrokeshire Marine Native Oyster Regeneration Project - <https://www.pembrokeshiremarinesac.org.uk/native-oyster-regeneration-project/>.

2.3.1.2 Introduction of preventative measures against seal pup disturbance.

Output from this action included the exploration of marine codes of conduct and their effectiveness at preventing seal pup disturbance for the Pembrokeshire Marine, Cardigan Bay and Pen Llŷn a'r Sarnau SACs. In addition, seal pup disturbance panels were installed across the MPA network to prevent members of the public from

accessing seal pups. Explorative work was also undertaken into the possibility of developing an app to provide information and to warn of potential disturbance, Pembrokeshire app was utilized as a starting point. Information was published to inform the public about the effects of seal pup disturbance (Figure 3). The work has educated people on the importance of keeping a distance from wildlife and prevented them from getting too close to nursery areas.



Figure 3. Seal Pup disturbance infographic. NRW Marine Protected Area Network Management Annual Report 2019-2020.

2.3.1.3 Development of an invasive and non-native species (INNS) biosecurity plan for the Pen Llyn a'r Sarnau (PLAS) SAC.

The INNS plan builds on the European Maritime Fisheries Fund (EMFF) funded Marine INNS biosecurity planning project in Pen Llyn a'r Sarnau SAC. During 2023-2024 it aimed to help develop and implement biosecurity plans across six other MPAs in the network (Cardigan Bay SAC, Pembrokeshire Marine SAC, Carmarthen Bay and Estuaries SAC, Menai Strait and Conwy Bay SAC, Severn Estuary SAC, Dee Estuary SAC). A series of stake holder workshops were held to review the plans and discuss methods to reduce the rate of introduction and spread of INNS. In addition, species specific (for example, slipper limpet, *Crepidula fornicata* and carpet sea-squirt,

Didemnum vexillum) action plans were drafted which will feed into the overall SAC biosecurity plans. Further information can be found here:

[PLAS Biosecurity Plan | Pen Llŷn a'r Sarnau](#)

[Pen Llŷn a'r Sarnau \(PLAS\) Biosecurity Project](#)

[Identification guide for selected marine non-native species](#)

2.3.1.4 Sharks Inspiring Action and Research with Communities (SIARC)

The Zoological Society of London's SIARC project, which is in its second phase, aims to focus on the recovery of six species of sharks, skate and ray, which are threatened and important to Welsh heritage by involving local communities (Figure 4). The project was awarded funding through Nature Networks Funding (NNF) and has prioritised two Special Areas of Conservation - Pen Llŷn a'r Sarnau (PLAS) and Carmarthen Bay and Estuaries (CBAE) due to their diverse fish communities of conservation importance. The project has educated communities on shark, skate and ray identification and their importance through citizen science.



Figure 4. SAIC engages with local communities to educate about various sharks, skate and ray species. Image source: https://www.projectsiaarc.com/community-engagement/#citizen_science

2.3.1.5 Delivery of MPA Improvements in Wales

Gwynedd Council (Cyngor Gwynedd) and The Welsh Partnership of MPAs, along with local people, were awarded Nature Network Funding (see section 2.4) to improve the resilience of five large Marine Protected Areas across Wales. The Welsh Partnership consists of officers from Pen Llŷn a'r Sarnau SAC, Cardigan Bay SAC, Pembrokeshire Marine SAC, Carmarthen Bay and Estuaries SAC, and the cross border site – the Severn Estuary SAC to support coherent and collaborative working across the Welsh MPA network. The partnership focuses on delivering a water quality programme;

rolling out a coastal otter programme and data analysis project; providing a marine litter support and guidance programme and running a [programme](#) to help local people to reduce disturbance to native species.

2.3.1.6 Marine Indicator Project

The Wildlife Trust of South and West Wales has used Nature Networks Funding to monitor globally important seabird species (Figure 5) and bottlenose dolphins within the Skomer, Skokholm and the Seas off Pembrokeshire Special Protection Area (SPA), and the Cardigan Bay Special Area of Conservation (SAC). Annual monitoring included breeding seabird populations of the Site of Special Scientific Interest (SSSI) and National Nature Reserves (NNR) islands of Skomer and Skokholm. The project will add valuable information and build on existing knowledge of the Skomer, Skokholm and the Seas off Pembrokeshire Special Protection Area (SPA) and the Cardigan Bay Special Area of Conservation (SAC).



Figure 5. Puffins are one of the important seabird species within the Skomer, Skokholm and the Seas off Pembrokeshire Special Protection Area (SPA). Source: Jennifer Welsh, Welsh Government)

2.3.1.7 Saltmarsh restoration feasibility study

In 2024, a restoration project of the Great Rhymney Wharf saltmarsh was completed. The project involved the restoration and extension of polders through the installation of over 2km of fencing. By retaining sediment from the water column from the receding tide, sediment will accrete and, through natural succession, become a saltmarsh. The work has restored and extended a valuable saltmarsh to increase biodiversity and resilience within the Severn Estuary Special Area of Conservation (SAC) and support flood risk management. The scheme continues to be monitored using modern

technology, including drones, to allow the assessment of the structural integrity of the polders and their performance in stabilising and enhancing the saltmarsh and mudflat.

2.3.1.8 HPAI Surveillance of RSPB Grassholm

In response to reports of suspected HPAI in seabirds within protected sites in 2022, Welsh Government, through the MPA Management Grant Scheme funded RSPB to undertake monitoring of Grassholm Island for HPAI. The purpose of this project was to investigate if drones could be used for longer term monitoring purposes, in this case the impact of HPAI. The funding from this project allowed RSPB to carry out regular drone visits, allowing for detailed monitoring, providing full visual coverage of the colony and early detection of HPAI signs. The regular systematic monitoring allowed early detection of the disease so other eNGO's could be notified that are responsible for important seabird colonies such as Skomer and Skokholm within the MPA network.

Drones also improved nest monitoring, identifying areas abandoned since 2022 and offering insights into their reoccupation. Collaborations with the RSPB Conservation Science department confirmed drones could aid in productivity analysis as the clarity of images from the drone allowed plumage differences to be identified, though further trials are needed.

Drone footage also revealed late bird arrivals affecting colony phenology and productivity, potentially impacting long-term population recovery. Additionally, the funding supported two short films for advocacy and education, raising awareness about Grassholm's internationally important seabird colonies.



Figure 6. Aerial Image of Grassholm from drone footage 07-04-23 (image: Richardson Media)

2.4 OTHER ACHIEVEMENTS

The above highlight just a few of the ongoing projects which have been funded to help improve the environmental status of the Marine Protected Areas Network. Other achievements in in this last reporting period have included:

- the extension of existing marine monitoring capabilities through the use of specialised equipment such as drones,
- acoustic logger and acoustic cameras;
- improved mapping of Annex 1 Marine Habitats;
- introduction of a publicly available app highlighting coastal biodiversity and educating on marine wildlife disturbances;
- investigations into the impacts of landfill sites on MPAs and the gathering of evidence to understand coastal squeeze effects on MPAs.

The global Coronavirus (COVID-19) pandemic between 2020 and 2022, and the subsequent Welsh Government COVID-19 guidelines, hindered the delivery of some MPA Steering Group actions. Action delivery affected by COVID-19 included, but was not limited to, using inshore vessel monitoring systems (iVMS) to assess the vulnerability of network features; planned stakeholder events and community litter projects and risk-based fisheries enforcement.

Further information on the Marine Protected Area (MPA) Network Management and it's achievements can be found via the following links:

<https://www.gov.wales/sites/default/files/publications/2020-12/marine-protected-area-network-management-annual-report-2019-2020.pdf>

<https://www.gov.wales/sites/default/files/publications/2021-09/marine-protected-area-network-management-annual-report-2020-2021.pdf>

<https://www.gov.wales/sites/default/files/publications/2022-11/marine-protected-area-network-management-annual-report-2021-2022.pdf>

In 2022 NRW established the Nature Networks Programme which aims to increase biodiversity, and improve the condition, enhance the resilience and connectivity of marine, freshwater and terrestrial protected sites. The Programme consists of direct delivery by NRW and a grant scheme, the Nature Networks Fund, run in partnership with National Heritage Lottery Fund. Funding for NRW has led to the delivery of a wide range of marine projects which have prioritised the areas set out below. Further funding for the NNP has been confirmed for 2025/26. The Nature Networks Marine projects have prioritised the following areas:

- Bait collection across the MPA network in Wales to reduce the impact of intertidal bait collection in parts of the MPA network where the activity is inconsistent with conservation objectives.
- Marine Invasive Non-Native Species (INNS) Biosecurity Planning across the MPA Network

- Investigations into the decline of benthic habitats and species and identification and deliver of management measures required to reverse biodiversity loss and increase marine resilience
- Marine litter and derelict vessel prevention and management across the Welsh MPA network
- Improving Marine Conservation Advice (IMCA)
- Rumney Great Wharf polders. A project to design, develop and deliver improvements to, and establish new, polders at Rumney Great Wharf in the Severn Estuary SAC with the aim of developing nature-based solutions to restore saltmarsh and build the resilience of saltmarsh features to climate change pressures.
- Welsh Acoustic Marine Mammal Survey (WAMMS). The project will start in the North Anglesey Marine Special Area of Conservation, before moving on to the other two SACs designated for harbour porpoise.
- Understanding the likely scale of deterioration of MPA features due to coastal squeeze

In addition to the actions delivered by NRW, a range of projects designed to improve the condition of the MPA network have also been funded through the Nature Networks Fund. These include:

- Project SIARC (Sharks inspiring Action and Research with Communities) - Zoological Society of London). This project has focussed on strengthening the protection of marine Special Areas of Conservation (SACs) in Wales, and the recovery of threatened species of shark, skate and ray.
- Resilient Shores - Pembrokeshire Coastal Forum Community Interest Company. This project has built resilience across the Welsh MPA's and coastal designated sites, by minimising disturbance and encouraging engagement in protection and restoration.
- Bardsey marine mammal project; Connecting people with the sea - Bardsey Bird and Field Observatory. This project will improve the marine mammal monitoring and surveillance of Bardsey Island, a protected site with seals and cetaceans, to inform its future management.
- Facilitating Accelerated Nature Networks for Seagrass (FANNS) – Project Seagrass. This project will support seagrass restoration in three Special Areas of Conservation (SAC); Pembrokeshire Marine, Carmarthen Bay and Severn Estuary.
- Biosecurity for Life – RSPB. The focus of the project has been to prevent the establishment of non-native mammal predators such as rats that can prey on ground-nesting seabirds at a wide range of seabird sites along the Welsh coastline.

2.5 ASSESSMENT OF ACHIEVEMENT OF SECTION 123(2) OF MCAA

Since the last reporting period, the Welsh Government, along with Natural Resources Wales (NRW), have been working towards achieving the objectives in Section 123(2). The Welsh Government identified features in the Welsh Marine Zone which are likely to require protecting and are currently going through the designation process. These features add to the existing range of features present in the UK marine area. The designation, once complete, will help contribute to the conservation or improvement of the marine environment in the UK marine area. In addition, current governance, management and research projects which are in place to protect the MPA network will help further our understanding and allow the Welsh Government to put protection and restoration methods in place across the Welsh Marine Zone.

Once the designation of the identified features has been completed, the area will be subject to legislative restrictions, such as marine licencing or fisheries management to help conserve the area.

In the last reporting period, the Welsh Government has not made any other amendments to any orders made under Section 116 other than those outlined in this report. A condition assessment of the MPA network is currently being finalised and is due to be published in Summer 2025. In conjunction with the condition assessment, the Welsh Government will continue to work with stakeholders and conservation bodies to monitor and manage the Welsh MPA Network to work towards improving or conserving its status.

2.5.1 MCZ designations under section 124 of MCAA

No new Marine Conservation Zones (MCZ's) have been designated by the Welsh Government during this reporting period. We therefore are not able to report on the size or conservation objectives of new MCZ's as required by section 124 (b) of MCAA.

We have, however, continued to work towards designation of new MCZs and are making considerable progress. Recognising the contentious nature of a previous consultation on highly protected marine conservation zones (HPMCZs), much of the designation programme has focused on detailed stakeholder engagement and collaboration through the MCZ task and finish group. A pre-consultation engagement exercise was launched over several months and completed in April 2023. The Minister for Climate Change at the time issued a written statement ([here](#)) at the outset of the engagement.

Upon completion of this wider engagement exercise NRW and JNCC, in their capacity as Statutory Nature Conservation Bodies, have developed site proposals and advice to Welsh Government on how their proposals will complete the benthic habitats and species component of our network. This has included identifying six 'areas of search,' for consideration as potential MCZs. NRW and JNCC have provided evidence on potential options for site proposals that now require a Regulatory Impact Assessment (RIA). The RIA has been commissioned, is fundamental to the evidence base and is a legislative requirement prior to making decisions on designations.

Skomer MCZ

There is currently one MCZ designated in Welsh Waters, Skomer Island (Figure 7). Licensable marine activities and fishing for or taking plants from the sea continue to be restricted through bylaws and codes of conduct.

Further information on Skomer MCZ's byelaws and codes of conduct can be found [here](#).

Derogations for scientific purposes are also restricted, with the promotion of Non-destructive research methods.

Conservation aspects of Skomer MCZ continue to be monitored by NRW and West Wales Wildlife Trust (for aspects such as seabird species counts, marine algae distribution and abundance, marine invertebrate distribution and abundance) on an annual basis. The information from the monitoring feeds into more immediate reactive decisions as well as longer term policy outcomes.

NRW's project status reports summarise the progress and current status of monitoring projects in the Skomer MCZ. These projects not only provide the evidence needed to report on the condition of the Skomer MCZ itself but make an important contribution to the evidence used in assessing the condition and conservation status of the Pembrokeshire Marine Special Area of Conservation, within which the MCZ is situated.

Further information on these projects is available here:
[Skomer Marine Conservation Zone Project Status Report 2023](#)

More information on conservation of the Skomer MCZ can be found here:
[Skomer Marine Conservation Zone Annual Report 2023-24](#)



Figure 7. Skomer MCZ off the west Pembrokeshire coast. Source: JNCC <https://jncc.gov.uk/mpa-mapper/>

2.5.2 Further work required to meet section 123(2)

Sections 2.3.1 and 2.4 of this report have highlighted the ongoing work being undertaken to achieve good environmental status of the Welsh MPA network and what has been achieved in this last reporting period. In addition, the Welsh Government is working towards designating additional marine areas for protection under The Marine and Coastal Access Act 2009 (MCAA). MCAA lays out the legislation for what is required for the creation of a network of conservation sites (MCZ). Section 123 (2) states that the objective is that the MCZs form a network which:

- contributes to the conservation or improvement of the marine environment in the UK marine area;
- where the features which are protected by the sites comprised in the network represent the range of features present in the UK marine area;
- and that the designation of sites comprised in the network reflects the fact that the conservation of a feature may require the designation of more than one site.

The next steps in our MCZ designation work programme include finalising the Regulatory Impact Assessment (RIA). The RIA is looking at the impact of the six areas of search referenced in section 2.5.1. on any potential stakeholders. It will also set out the economic, environmental, and social costs involved with designating any of these as MCZs, as well as the benefits. We anticipate the RIA being completed in summer 2025. Once complete the findings of the RIA will then be used to refine the site advice for submission to Welsh Ministers and inform the development of the consultation package on the proposed designations.

A substantial amount of work has been conducted to identify areas for designation and the next step will include looking at priority evidence needs. This is expected to be carried out between 2025 and 2026. NRW's aim is to progress points in the priority list and, whilst commissioning evidence may not necessarily be immediate, it is likely that a variety of scoping exercises will be conducted. Appropriate actions, such as liaising with other bodies, will be utilized to deliver the work.

The priority evidence list is available here:

[Assessing Welsh Fisheries Activities project | GOV.WALES](#)

Further information on the legislation can be found at:

<https://www.legislation.gov.uk/ukpga/2009/23/section/123>

PART 3. SUMMARY AND FURTHER STEPS

This report has outlined how, over the past six years, MPA management in Wales has led to improvements in marine environment monitoring capabilities and how the work has contributed to achieving the objectives in Section 123 and 124 of MCAA. MPA and species restoration projects, as well as the development of measures to prevent disturbances are some of the ways this has attained. The management measures have contributed to the proposed improvement in condition of the network.

Data regarding the condition of the MPA network has been collected and analysed, and is due to be published Summer 2025. The condition assessment results are expected to be publicly available going into the new assessment period.

Despite some challenges, new Areas of Search have been identified as part of work to designate further MCZs in Wales.

In line with the current assessment requirements, there will be a reporting period of six years and therefore, the next report on the Marine Protected Areas in Wales will be due at the beginning of 2031.

ANNEXES

ANNEX A: MPA DESIGNATIONS

Table 1. MPA designations and their legislative drivers, including the type of MPA, what they protect, and the relevant legislation or convention used to designate them.

Type of MPA	What is Protected	Legislative Driver
Special Protected Area (SPA)	These sites protect wild and migratory birds as listed in Annex I of the Directive, and the habitats they rely on for essential behaviours such as feeding and breeding.	The Conservation of Habitats and Species Regulations (2017) and the Conservation of Offshore Marine Habitats and Species Regulations (2017)
Special Areas of Conservation (SAC)	These sites protect a range and variety of habitats and (non-bird) species of European importance as listed in Annex I and II of the Directive.	the Conservation of Habitats and Species Regulations (2017) and the Conservation of Offshore Marine Habitats and Species Regulations (2017)
Marine Conservation Zone (MCZ)	These sites protect a range of habitats, species, geological and geomorphology features which are considered nationally important.	Marine and Coastal Access Act (2009)
Ramsar Site	These sites protect wetlands which are internationally important.	Convention on Wetlands of International Importance (1971)
Sites of Special Scientific Interest (SSSI)	These sites protect the best examples of the UK's flora, fauna, geological or physiographical features. Although they are primarily a terrestrial designation, they can cover the seashore down to the lowest tide.	Wildlife and Countryside Act 1981 (as amended)

ANNEX B: SHORTFALLS IN THE WELSH CONTRIBUTION TO THE UK NETWORK

Table 2. Shortfall habitats and species in the Irish Sea region.

Network shortfalls by habitat	Cause	Potential Solution
Subtidal coarse sediment	< 10% of area protected within existing MPAs	Increase area by 542km ²
Subtidal mixed sediment	< 10% of area protected within existing MPAs	Increase area by 185.7km ²
Fragile sponge and anthozoan communities on subtidal rocky habitat	MPAs currently only include 3 replicates.	Addition of 2 sites to the MPA network
Ross worm reef	MPAs currently only include <3 replicates.	Addition of sites subject to data
Pink sea fan (<i>Eunicella verrucosa</i>)	MPAs currently only include <3 replicates.	Addition of sites subject to data
Subtidal coarse sediment	< 10% of area protected within existing MPAs	Increase area by 81.1km ²
Subtidal sand	< 10% of area protected within existing MPAs	Increase area by 25.7km ²
Subtidal mud	< 10% of area protected within existing MPAs	Increase area by 215.2km ²
Mud habitats in deep water	MPAs currently only include <3 replicates.	Addition of 1 site to the MPA network
Sea-pen and burrowing megafauna communities	MPAs currently only include <3 replicates.	Addition of sites subject to data
Ocean quahog (<i>Arctica islandica</i>)	MPAs currently only include <3 replicates.	Addition of sites subject to data

Note that OSPAR guidance suggests a 20% protection of habitat area. Information adapted from 'Identifying Broad Areas of Search within Welsh waters for the Welsh MPA Network Completion Project' report, 2021.

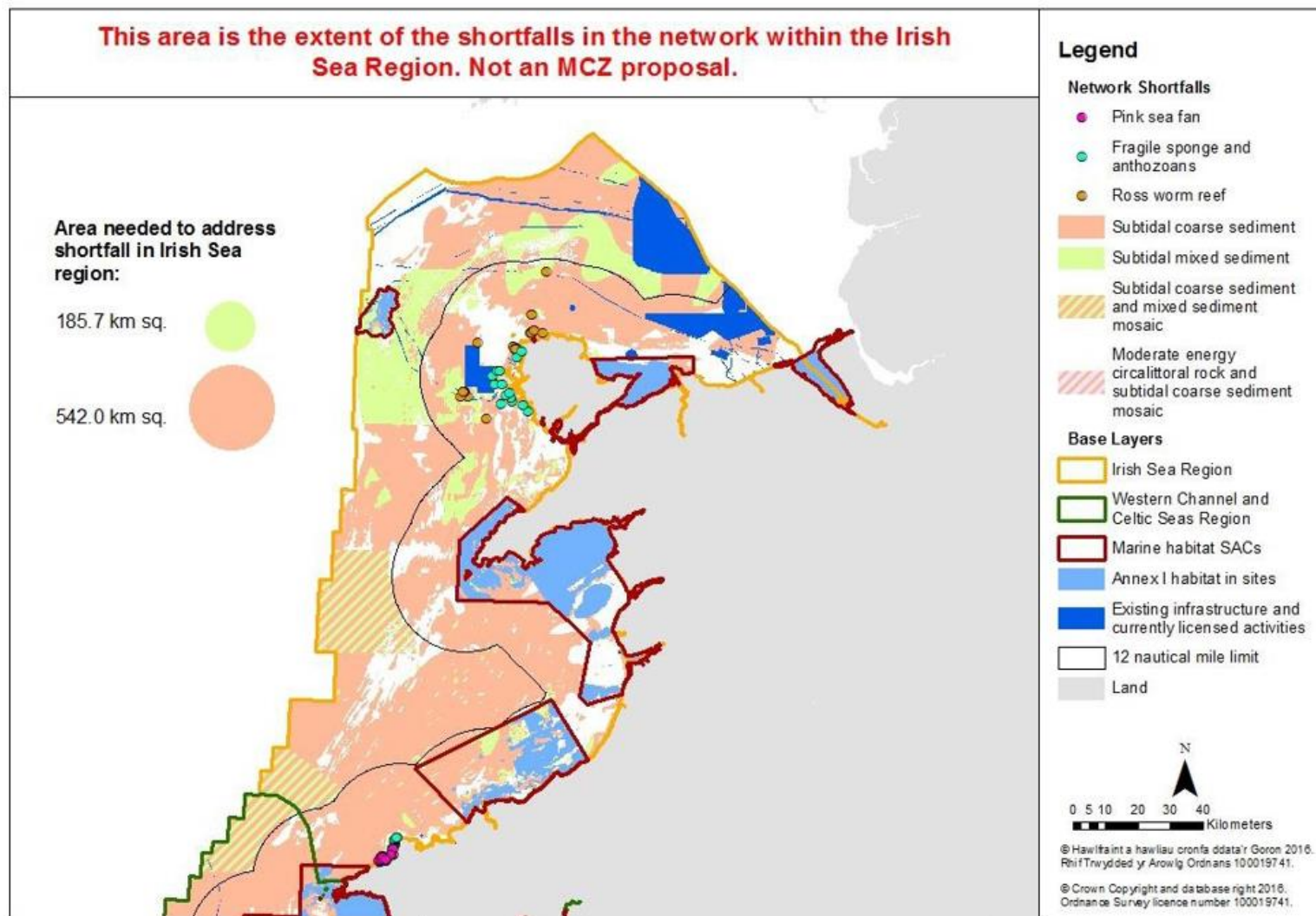


Figure 8. Broad Area of Search of the Irish Sea Region illustrating the shortfalls and habitat areas required to address the shortfall (Source: 2018 JNCC Overview of Areas of Search within Welsh waters).

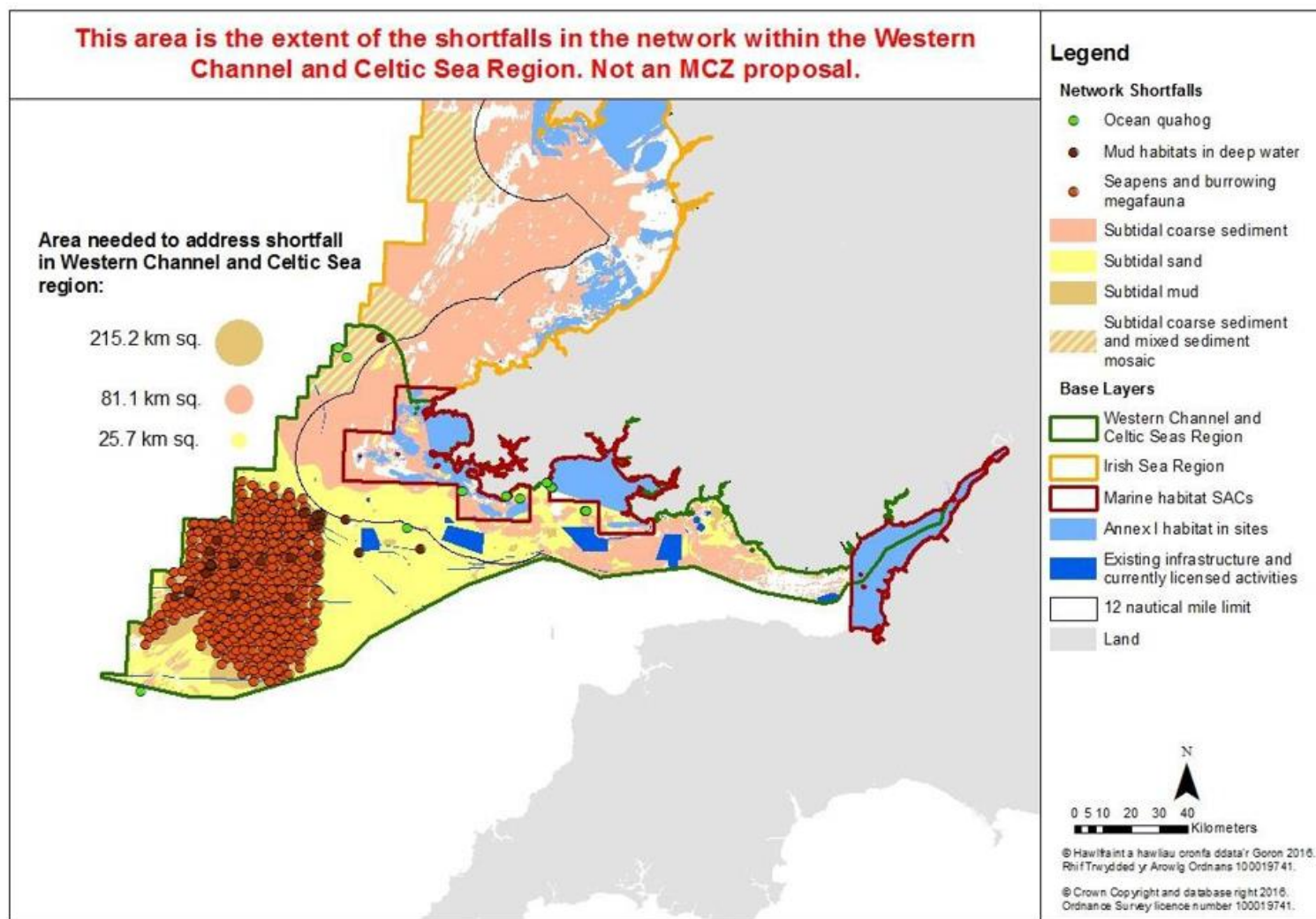


Figure 9. Broad Area of Search of the Western Channel and Celtic Sea region illustrating the shortfalls and habitat areas required to address the shortfall (Source: 2018 JNCC Overview of Areas of Search within Welsh waters).



Llywodraeth Cymru
Welsh Government

Mae'r ddogfen hon ar gael yn Gymraeg hefyd / This document is also available in Welsh
Rydym yn croesawu gohebiaeth a galwadau ffôn yn Gymraeg / We welcome correspondence and telephone calls in Welsh