

Habitat Assessment: Designated wildlife sites (SPA/SAC/Ramsar) behind existing past defence structures

Landward of the coast defences, the habitat along much of the coastline is designated not only as SPA, but also Ramsar site and in a few instances SAC. These designations reflect the value of these habitats as wetlands of international importance and are most comprehensively described using the Ramsar habitat classification. This provides a convenient method for describing the range of wetland habitats present within a Ramsar site. The assessment table has columns for each of the Ramsar habitats likely to be present. The appropriate columns have been ticked for each site to reflect the habitats that dominate in each section of the shoreline. An appropriate assessment of possible coast defence policy options should be made against these habitat types. These habitat types can also be related to the UK Biodiversity Action Plan (BAP) habitats present within each section of the coast. The predominant BAP habitats present in each section of coast have been provided in the habitat assessment table. The presence of rare species is a further qualifying criterion for Ramsar site designation. Information on the presence of rare species has not been collated in any comprehensive way and should be undertaken to make a comprehensive assessment of policy options, however, where presence of important species is known, information on these has been provided in the table.

For each coastal section, the question is asked whether the conservation objectives of the site would be met if the defence fails? In most instances, the answer to this is 'no'. In these cases compensation would be required to offset the lost habitat. The next column of the table considers what habitats would require compensation. The final column of the table considers the time frame in which it would be possible to recreate lost habitats. These time estimates would need to be subject to further research to verify and are based on best judgement. It is clear that new or recreated habitats will accrue increased nature conservation value over time. The rate at which this develops will change over time so that there might be rapid increase in value over an initial period of years followed by a much more gradual accrual over a longer period of time. The compensatory habitat is unlikely to reach the full diversity of the lost habitat for many years but there is likely to be a point at which sufficient structure and function has been developed for it to have met the requirements of compensation. The time assessments have been set at levels where functional habitats will have developed even if they are not full replacements to those that have been lost.