

Synopsis Report of the Consultation on the Seabird Conservation Strategy and Action Plan for Northern Ireland



Department of
**Agriculture, Environment
and Rural Affairs**

An Roinn

**Talmhaíochta, Comhshaoil
agus Gnóthaí Tuaithe**

Depairtment o'

**Fairmin, Environment
an' Kintra Matthers**

www.daera-ni.gov.uk

On request, we can arrange to provide other formats of the document, such as:

- **Paper Copy**
- **Large Print**
- **Braille**
- **Other Languages**

To request an alternative format, or if you have any queries regarding the report, please contact us:

Email: MarineConservation@daera-ni.gov.uk

If you have a hearing difficulty, you can contact the Department via **Text Relay**.

Dial: 18001 028 9052 4528

Post: Marine Conservation

DAERA Marine and Fisheries Division

Clare House

303 Airport Road West

Sydenham Intake

BT3 9ED

Front cover image credit: Gary Burrows – Northern Gannet (*Morus bassanus*)

Executive Summary

In 2024 the Department carried out a public consultation on the Seabird Conservation Strategy and Action Plan for Northern Ireland. This strategy outlined the Department's Aim, Objectives and Actions. In total, 37 responses were submitted to this consultation.

The Department's Seabird Conservation Strategy and Action Plan was well received, with the aim and objectives strongly supported by a minimum of three-quarters of respondents.

There were a number of themes which emerged throughout the responses, in particular related to **data and monitoring** and **wider engagement** with the public to elevate the status of seabirds.

While the majority of respondents agreed with the action plan presented to deliver the objectives in the strategy, many felt this needed to be more ambitious due to the urgency of the crises faced by seabirds both in terms of biodiversity loss and the impacts from climate change.

Contents

Executive Summary	2
Glossary	4
Introduction.....	8
Common Themes	9
Monitoring and data collection	9
Protected Areas	10
Education and Engagement.....	12
Offshore Wind	12
Fishing Industry and Other Interactions	13
Representative and Collaborative Co-Delivery of the Strategy and Action Plan	15
Long-term Funding.....	16
Urgency and Delivery Timeframes	16
Synopsis of Responses to the Consultation Questions and Departmental Responses	18
Species List Selection	18
Aim.....	20
Objectives and Actions.....	21
Objective 1	21
Objective 2.....	22
Objective 3.....	23
Objective 4.....	24
Objective 5.....	26
Objective 6.....	27
Outcomes	Error! Bookmark not defined.
ANNEX A – Species Scope and Rationale.....	30

Glossary

Anthropogenic – effects, processes, objects, or materials are those that are derived from human activities.

Areas of Special Scientific Interest (ASSIs) – are declared under The Environment (Northern Ireland) Order 200235 for their species, habitat and/or geological features.

Biodiversity – is the variability among living organisms from all sources including, *inter alia*, terrestrial, marine and other aquatic ecosystems and the ecological complexes of which they form part; this includes diversity within species, between species and of ecosystems.

Bycatch – Fishermen sometimes catch and discard animals they do not want, cannot sell, or are not allowed to keep. This is collectively known as “bycatch.”

Co-Design – the process involving active collaboration between multiple stakeholders in the design and development of a product, service or system.

eNGOs – environmental Non-Governmental Organisations.

EIP – the Environmental Improvement Plan for Northern Ireland, required under the Environment Act 2021.

Fisheries Act 2020 – this Act makes provision in relation to fisheries, fishing, aquaculture and marine conservation following EU Exit. There are eight fisheries objectives, with the Sustainability and Ecosystem Objectives being most relevant to this Strategy.

Good Environmental Status (GES) – The environmental status of marine waters where these provide ecologically diverse and dynamic oceans and seas which are clean, healthy and productive, as defined under the UK Marine Strategy Regulations, 2010.

Joint Fisheries Statement (JFS) – this sets out the policies for achieving the eight fisheries objectives within the Fisheries Act 2020.

JNCC – the Joint Nature Conservation Committee.

Marine Conservation Zones (MCZ) – used to refer to MCZs designated under section 13 of the Marine Act (Northern Ireland) 2013 in the Northern Ireland inshore region and in section

116 of the Marine and Coastal Access Act 2009 in the Northern Ireland offshore region. MCZs are designated to safeguard vulnerable or unique marine species and habitats of national importance.

Marine Protected Area (MPA) – Used to describe a geographic area of the marine environment which has been designated for specific conservation objectives in relation to the features present. The ultimate aim of these sites is for long-term management to achieve sustainable use, both for marine ecosystems and associated stakeholders.

Northern Ireland Priority Species (NIPS) – Priority species require conservation action because of their decline, rarity and importance in an all-Ireland and UK context.

Other effective area-based conservation measures (OECMs) – areas that are achieving the long term and effective *in-situ* conservation of biodiversity outside of protected areas.

OSPAR – refers to the Oslo - Paris Convention for the Protection of the Marine Environment of the North-East Atlantic. It is an agreement by relevant governments and the European Community to co-operate to protect the marine environment of the North-East Atlantic.

UK Marine Strategy – This strategy provides an updated assessment of our seas and sets objectives, targets, indicators and measures for achieving Good Environmental Status.

Ramsar sites – these are wetlands of international importance designated under the Ramsar Convention and are classified as MPAs.

Restoration – the process of improving or returning a marine ecosystem or habitat to a healthier and more natural state after it has been damaged or degraded by human activities or environment factors.

SNCB – Statutory Nature Conservation Body

Special Protected Areas (SPAs) – are designated under the Conservation (Natural Habitats, etc.) Regulations (Northern Ireland) 1995 (as amended) to select sites for bird species included in Annex 1 of the Directive, and also for regularly occurring migratory species.

Strategies and Drivers

30x30 – refers to efforts by the global community to conserve 30% of terrestrial and marine habitats by 2030. The 190 countries who adopted the Kunming-Montreal Global Biodiversity Framework at COP15 in 2022 (**Convention on Biological Diversity Global Biodiversity Framework**) are committed to this ambitious target. Further details are available [here](#).

OSPAR North-East Atlantic Environment Strategy 2030 – details how contracting parties will implement the OSPAR Convention until 2030. It contains strategic and operational objectives to address biodiversity loss, pollution and climate change. Further details are available [here](#).

The Marine Strategy – The Marine Strategy Regulations 2010 – requires action to be taken to achieve or maintain Good Environmental Status (GES) in our seas, in a coordinated approach across all four UK Governments. More information can be found [here](#).

The Marine Act – The Marine Act (Northern Ireland) 2013 – legislation which provides for marine plans and Marine Conservation Zones (MCZs) in the NI inshore region. The Act can be found [here](#).

Environmental Improvement Plan for Northern Ireland – Northern Ireland's first Environmental Improvement Plan, published in September 2024, forms the basis for a coherent and effective set of interventions that collectively can deliver real improvements in the quality of the environment. The preparation and publication of an EIP is a statutory duty placed upon the Department by Schedule 2 of the Environment Act 2021, which came into force in July 2022. Further details and links can be found on the DAERA website [here](#).

The Conservation (Natural Habitats, etc.) Regulations (Northern Ireland) 1995 (as amended) – transpose the requirements of the EU Habitats and Birds Directives, enabling the designation of Special Areas of Conservation (SACs) and Special Protection Areas (SPAs), forming a national site network of protected nature conservation areas. SACs and SPAs comprise part of the Marine Protected Areas (MPA) network. The Regulations can be found [here](#).

Marine Plan for Northern Ireland – will inform and guide the regulation, management, use and protection of our marine area. It is a single document made up of two plans, one for the

inshore region and one for the offshore region. Further details and links to the most recent draft, and 2018 consultation responses, can be found [here](#).

Introduction

On 23rd September 2024 the Department of Agriculture, Environment and Rural Affairs (DAERA), hereafter referred to as the Department, opened a consultation on Northern Ireland's first Seabird Conservation Strategy and Action Plan ('the strategy'). The development of the Strategy was initiated in 2022 following a co-design process with relevant stakeholders who formed the Northern Ireland Seabird Conservation Strategy Advisory Group.

The consultation was issued to a wide range of stakeholders and was also made available on the Department's website. A copy of the consultation document can be found by following this link: [Seabird Conservation Strategy and Action Plan for Northern Ireland](#).

The consultation ran for 12 weeks to ensure stakeholders and the public had sufficient time to consider the strategy and provide comment.

In total, the Department received 37 responses from members of the public, environmental Non-Governmental Organisations (eNGOs), fishing, and renewable industry representatives, private sector, and public- and arms-length bodies.

Not all stakeholders responded to every question in the survey. When assessing support for each proposal, the Department did not include such nil responses in its calculation of quantitative support. There were 37 responses in total, 31 collected via Citizen Space NI and six received via email. 40% of responses were from organisations and 60% were from members of the public.

The Department has considered all responses that it received to this consultation. This synopsis document reports the main issues raised by respondents related to the proposals as set out in the consultation document.

Common Themes

Throughout consultation responses there were several recurring common themes:

Monitoring and data collection

The majority of respondents emphasised the central importance of monitoring and data collection. Some specific suggestions which were widely supported across respondents were the calls to increase: seabird tagging and tracking; at-sea surveys; monitoring and recording of overwintering species; and recording of prey availability.

Some respondents would like to see use of innovative data collection methods to plug data gaps, such as utilising citizen science projects and remote electronic monitoring using cameras for bycatch data.

Respondents broadly commented that the current system of data sharing and data centralisation was a major hurdle to seabird monitoring and management for recovery in Northern Ireland and would like to see these improved.

Departmental Response

The Department agrees with the importance of monitoring and data collection in determining the distribution of our seabird species, population density and health. The integration of monitoring and assessment of marine bird population status and condition is a prevalent issue across the region, recognised in the [OSPAR NEAES Progress Report 2025](#). It acknowledges where monitoring and data collection needs to go further, especially with regards to at-sea data. Objectives and actions focussed on Evidence will be updated in the final Strategy to capture these comments.

The Department agrees with those respondents who suggested developing and supporting innovative data collection methods. As well as those suggested in responses, the Department encourages improved use of technology such as drone surveys, remote monitoring, and aerial survey combined with tagging studies, and will reflect this in the final Strategy. Utilising and indeed expanding the use of citizen science is explored in its own [Education and Engagement theme](#) below.

Much of the data used by the Department in forming this Strategy is available online from sources including the Seabird Monitoring Programme (SMP) database¹ and Wetland Birds Survey (WeBS) reports² as well as NBN Atlas³. Refer to Annex A for details on how the species of focus for this Strategy were chosen, using these data.

While monitoring and data collection must be supported by data access and sharing with all stakeholders, there are well reported limitations which can prevent creation of a centralised data repository including long-running issues of ownership, and therefore presents difficulties with regards to access, use and sharing. There are also issues with variable data standards and the expertise needed to interpret nuances across various sources. The Department is committed to the continued improvement of data availability and transparency. It will collaborate with partners responsible for data collection to facilitate access to both Departmental survey results and related datasets, sharing these on the DAERA website where appropriate.

Protected Areas

Respondents highlighted a lack of focus on designated sites within the text of the Strategy, outlining their view that these areas must be well-managed, monitored and enforced to be effective.

They noted how many Special Protection Areas (SPAs) and Areas of Special Scientific Interest (ASSIs) are reported as being in unfavourable condition and were concerned that monitoring will continue without implementing appropriate management measures to stop a downward trend and improve condition. Respondents asked for condition assessment reports and outcomes to be made more readily available.

Respondents also highlighted the need to finalise the designation of the proposed marine SPAs in Carlingford Lough and East Coast Marine. Several respondents also raised the need for an SPA sufficiency review.

¹ <https://app.bto.org/seabirds/public/index.jsp>

² <https://app.bto.org/webs-reporting/numbers.jsp>

³ <https://nbnatlas.org/>

Departmental response

This strategy, alongside the **Marine Protected Areas Strategy for the Northern Ireland Inshore Region 2025-2030**⁴ (the 'MPA Strategy'), **Northern Ireland Blue Carbon Action Plan 2025-2030**⁵ and the upcoming **Elasmobranch Conservation Strategy**⁶, should be considered one of a suite of strategies and action plans published by the Department which are delivering on targets for nature recovery in the [Environmental Improvement Plan for Northern Ireland](#) (EIP).

The Department will ensure to clarify the focus of this Strategy as delivering for the protection and recovery of seabirds throughout the Northern Ireland marine area. The approach will incorporate gathering data across this entire range to inform our understanding and using this knowledge to apply management measures at a local and/or site level. The designated sites network therefore plays an integral role in the protection of seabirds, especially where a species may qualify as a designated feature. The MPA Strategy details the Department's approach to protected site monitoring, designation, management and enforcement; there is crossover in this approach to certain Objectives of this Strategy, particularly Objective 4 under the Management Theme.

Condition assessment is based on Common Standards Monitoring guidelines where 6-year reporting cycles use the best available data at the time of reporting to report on feature condition⁷. The Department acknowledges that both prompt condition assessment and publication of results through its website is necessary to enable the implementation of recommendations where these are necessary to improve the status of protected features.

The Department notes the comments on the designation of Carlingford Lough and East Coast Marine proposed SPAs. Proposed SPAs are afforded full protection similar to classified SPAs and officials are engaging on the process to finalise the designation. In terms of completing a SPA Sufficiency Review, the Department will consider how to address any protected site network gaps identified for seabirds. The Northern Ireland MPA network

⁴ [Marine Protected Areas Strategy for the Northern Ireland Inshore Region 2025-2030 | Department of Agriculture, Environment and Rural Affairs](#)

⁵ [Northern Ireland Blue Carbon Action Plan 2025 – 2030 | Department of Agriculture, Environment and Rural Affairs](#)

⁶ [Consultation on the Elasmobranch Conservation Strategy for Northern Ireland | Department of Agriculture, Environment and Rural Affairs](#)

⁷ [JNCC \(2004\) Common Standards Monitoring Guidance for Birds, Version August 2004, JNCC, Peterborough, ISSN 1743-8160.](#)

contributes to the wider UK network, and the Department will continue to engage with Defra and the devolved governments for Wales and Scotland on UK priorities.

Education and Engagement

There was general agreement that objectives relating to education and awareness could be strengthened through the addition of further actions, including an action to increase national and international public awareness of Northern Ireland's seabirds, their ecological value, and the various issues they face.

A recommendation was made to strengthen training and capacity-building efforts among local stakeholders and conservation professionals. This included improving communication and engagement with site rangers, to include safe engagement with nature and minimising disturbance by leisure activities; and expanding the availability of skills training in areas such as surveys, species identification, drone operation and ringing. The respondent believed this would allow the network of volunteers to expand and improve citizen science data collection.

Departmental response

The Department notes these comments and will update the action table to reflect the changes suggested within the awareness and training objectives.

Offshore Wind

Several respondents noted a lack of focus on offshore wind development within the Strategy and suggested adding a specific objective focussed on this, to ensure seabird conservation is embedded in marine spatial planning and energy policy.

While they acknowledged the importance of offshore wind to achieving emission reduction targets and UK Net Zero goals, multiple stakeholders raised concerns about the cumulative impacts on seabird populations, potential disturbance to foraging and breeding areas, collision risks and habitat loss arising from offshore renewable energy development.

There was also strong support for the application of, and adherence to, the mitigation hierarchy (avoid, minimise, mitigate and compensate) with compensation only being sought when mitigation was not possible. Responses from the offshore wind sector state their commitment to avoiding and mitigating their impact on the wider environment and request that the strategy clarifies how the delivery of compensation measures for offshore wind farms can contribute where necessary, ensuring the strategy remains adaptable to future pressures and developments.

Departmental Response

The Department is committed to addressing nature recovery in a holistic manner, continuing to work to finalise the Marine Plan for Northern Ireland. The use of the Mitigation Hierarchy and the Precautionary Principle are embedded throughout the Marine Plan for Northern Ireland and therefore applies to all activities which take place in the Northern Ireland marine region. The potential impacts arising from offshore renewable energy will be evaluated through the development of the Northern Ireland specific sensitivity analysis.

The Department is also exploring the use of strategic compensation measures for potential impacts to protected sites and associated features from offshore wind developments. This includes identifying what would be considered appropriate measures and how this would be implemented and monitored.

Fishing Industry and Other Interactions

Various respondents referred to the potential conflicts between seabird conservation and fishing activities, with one raising concerns about unintended consequences of the current broad focus of the strategy for businesses, industry and communities. Respondents also commented that major global fisheries threats to seabirds come from gear types such as long-lining and gill-netting which are not practiced in Northern Ireland waters.

Respondents commonly highlighted the dependency of foraging seabirds on fish stocks, and overall healthy seas. There were calls to ensure that fisheries practices were sustainable and management was carried out using an ecosystem-based approach.

Concerns were raised regarding aquaculture activities and intertidal shellfish collection in relation to habitat loss and bird assemblage disturbance (physical, noise and visual). Respondents also noted other conflicting interactions between seabirds and industries including: the interactions between cormorant and gulls on inland fisheries; increasing urban gull numbers; possible collision risk with air transport; and the balance required to minimise seabird disturbance as a result of tourism and recreation.

Departmental response

The Department agrees with the stakeholder comment that some of the more impactful fishery practices on seabird populations are not conducted within Northern Ireland's waters. This is a prime instance highlighting the vulnerability of migratory seabird populations, in that such fishery practices in other areas may still exert ecological pressures on these species when they traverse regions beyond Northern Ireland's jurisdiction.

The UK has a duty to implement the fisheries objectives within the **Fisheries Act 2020**⁸; of particular relevance to potential impacts on seabirds are the Sustainability and the Ecosystem Objectives. These require that fishing activities are environmentally sustainable, use an ecosystem-based approach to reduce negative impacts on ecosystems and minimise bycatch of sensitive species. The **Joint Fisheries Statement**⁹ provides the strategic policy direction to deliver the requirements of the Act, adopting a collaborative and evidence-based approach to fisheries management across the UK. The UK is required to report on the implementation of the policies and achievement of the fisheries objectives whenever they consider it appropriate to do so, and in any event, within six years of its publication or most recent review.

Fisheries observers on Northern Ireland fishing fleet vessels recorded zero incidents of birds being captured in 2024/2025 but did note extremely rare collisions between wires and gulls (personal communication). The Department will continue to improve the data collection regarding bycatch and bird strikes on board fishing vessels through collaboration with partners, as detailed in the [Monitoring and Data Collection](#) theme.

⁸ [Fisheries Act 2020](#)

⁹ [Joint Fisheries Statement \(JFS\) - GOV.UK](#)

Representative and Collaborative Co-Delivery of the Strategy and Action Plan

A significant number of responses stressed the importance of governance, recommending that the proposed Advisory Group comprise representatives from all relevant sectors, community groups and government departments. Stakeholders suggested that the structure, remit and responsibilities of this group should be formalised to build trust and to ensure the strategy showed alignment with other environmental strategies.

Others emphasised the need for policy alignment and coordination between Northern Ireland and the Republic of Ireland, as well as co-operation with the other Governments within the UK and the Isle of Man, highlighting that impacts within one jurisdiction could affect seabird populations across the shared marine region, with some advocating for a “Joint All-Island Seabird Conservation Action Plan”.

Departmental response

The Department proposes that it will reconvene the Northern Ireland Seabird Conservation Strategy Advisory Group (‘the Advisory Group’), incorporating members from Government and public bodies, academia, eNGOs and industry, making sure there is opportunity for representation from all necessary groups and jurisdictions as necessary. This Advisory Group will oversee the delivery of objectives and actions within the Seabird Conservation Strategy and will report back progress to the Marine Nature Recovery Oversight Group, the latter supporting the implementation of the other marine nature recovery strategies and action plans delivering to EIP targets.

Department officials liaised with the other devolved governments during the development of their respective seabird conservation strategies. The Department regularly engages with its counterparts in the rest of the UK and Republic of Ireland as part of advisory and working groups.

Upcoming initiatives, including the recently awarded cross-border PEACEPLUS programme, offer significant potential for enhance collaboration across the island of Ireland. Targeted seabird conservation measures are expected to contribute to the implementation of key actions outlined in the strategy. The Department will have observers on the steering groups for each of the PEACEPLUS projects to ensure effective support and delivery.

Long-term Funding

A common request throughout responses was the need for ring-fenced, long-term funding, without which, respondents suggested there was a risk of failing to deliver actions. Some respondents referred to widening the scope of the Department's Marine and Environment Fisheries Fund (MEFF) to support seabird-specific conservation while others called for a dedicated Northern Ireland government budget focused on biodiversity and nature recovery.

Some stakeholders suggested encouraging the offshore wind industry to contribute financially to seabird research and monitoring programmes or strategic compensation.

Departmental response

At present, funding for seabird conservation action is available within PEACEPLUS and the Environment Fund, some of which has already been allocated to specific projects. Grant aid is available under MEFF to support Environment and Conservation Action projects related to fishing and the marine environment. The Advisory Group can also identify relevant funding opportunities.

The Department has been engaging with Defra on the development of their Marine Recovery Fund (MRF) policy which could enable offshore wind developers to discharge their liabilities from offshore wind installations where these were adversely impacting marine protected areas by paying into a fund which is then used to deliver strategic compensation measures, some of which may be related to seabird conservation projects. The Department is currently exploring options for application of the MRF and strategic compensation measures within the Northern Ireland Inshore Region.

Urgency and Delivery Timeframes

Many respondents requested increasing the level of ambition across the strategy to reflect the urgency required for seabird recovery, given the cumulative pressures on seabird populations.

Several respondents recommended enhancing the clarity and precision of the strategy's Actions and Objectives by incorporating SMART (Specific, Measurable, Achievable, Realistic,

and Time-bound) targets and ensuring that each action is appropriately costed and resourced.

Respondents further suggested that the strategy should be reviewed more frequently than every six years to address evolving factors such as climate change, anthropogenic impacts, and to incorporate new data and emerging threats, thereby remaining responsive and adaptive.

Departmental response

The Department will review the objectives and actions to reflect the urgency for implementation and to align the strategy deadlines with EIP targets, applying SMART timeframes where possible. Co-delivery will be dependent on the capacity of partners and the availability of funding to support this. The role of the Advisory Group will be to oversee the delivery of the Objectives and associated Actions, keeping these under review, to address this.

The Department acknowledges that although the six-year review cycle may not capture issues that arise within this period, these can still be taken forward through the objectives and actions, which will identify them on an ongoing basis. The management of actions should incorporate sufficient flexibility to adapt as circumstances change but still retain their inclusion through the formal review of the strategy. Alignment of the strategy review dates with the other UK Seabird Conservation Strategies will also be considered.

Synopsis of Responses to the Consultation Questions and Departmental Responses

Species List Selection

The consultation suggested a list of proposed species of focus for the strategy and action plan (refer to Annex A).

77% of respondents agreed with the proposed list of species.

Several respondents suggested consideration of additional species for inclusion, encompassing a broader range such as breeding and passage seabirds, wintering waterbirds and also waders.

Departmental response

The justification for the original list of species is provided in Annex A. Each of the suggested additional species has been considered, and justification for their addition or exclusion is provided below.

Little Tern (*Sternula albifrons*) was suggested by stakeholders during the co-design process as this was a previous infrequent breeding species in Northern Ireland. However, at the time of writing the draft strategy there was no conclusive evidence of breeding since 1996. They potentially share breeding sites with other more abundant tern species in Northern Ireland and could benefit from actions aimed at tern conservation more broadly. However, in recent years (2022/2023) a Little Tern pair was present but not confirmed as breeding and in 2024 there was a breeding attempt in Outer Ards¹⁰. Based on this the Department will add Little Tern to the list as a named species.

Several passage migrant seabirds were suggested including Balearic Shearwater (*Puffinus mauretanicus*), Sooty Shearwater (*Ardenna grisea*), and Arctic Skua (*Stercorarius parasiticus*). These species may utilise the Northern Ireland marine area to forage or rest on the open sea during the migration period as they move to and from breeding and wintering grounds. Although they are of international importance, they are not heavily reliant on Northern Ireland's habitats. Instances of occurrence for these species are low on the National Biodiversity Network (NBN) Atlas, but this may reflect the untargeted nature of data collection

¹⁰ El Haddad, H. & Upton, A. J. 2025. [The Northern Ireland Seabird Report 2024](#). BTO Research Report 779: British Trust for Ornithology, Thetford.

for passage species and their offshore distribution. The Department will not add these to the current iteration of the strategy as named species. However, due to the likely foraging and resting habitat similarities with other seabirds that have been included, they could nevertheless benefit from many of the actions outlined in the strategy. For example, improved data collection in the marine area could provide more insight into the presence of these species in Northern Ireland.

Additional wintering waterbirds and ducks proposed for inclusion were the Black Throated Diver (*Gavia arctica*), Great Northern Diver (*Gavia immer*) and Red Breasted Merganser (*Mergus serrator*). Although the Department made the decision to expand the species list outside 'seabirds' to include waterbirds, those species selected were chosen due to their larger numbers at designated sites, where populations may be of national/international significance. Black Throated Diver is not as numerous, and Northern Ireland is of less importance to their international conservation. The Department considers that measures to protect similar species included in the strategy may have indirect positive impacts on these and other marine waterbirds and ducks. However, Great Northern Diver and Red Breasted Merganser are found at a number of sites around Northern Ireland and are nationally important, so will be added to the species list.

Some respondents suggested the inclusion of intertidal waders such as Oystercatcher, (*Haematopus ostralegus*) and Golden Plover (*Pluvialis apricaria*). While the downward trend of waders is acknowledged, they are considered beyond the scope of this strategy, due to the wider, cross-cutting nature of the main threats to this group of birds which occur outside of the marine and coastal environment. Such issues include "short-stopping", a potential shift in migration habits due to climate change, or land-use change resulting in impacts to upland breeding habitats. The Department will apply this strategy amongst a suite of other Strategies and Action Plans which will deliver against EIP targets for the recovery of the Northern Ireland marine environment: therefore some of these wider "catchment" issues may more suitably be addressed in complementary strategies.

Stakeholders were asked whether they agreed that a Seabird Conservation Strategy for Northern Ireland was necessary.

100% of respondents agreed with this question.

Aim

To improve the conservation status of seabirds in Northern Ireland through effective management of current and emerging threats, with the overall goal of meeting Good Environmental Status.

87% of respondents agreed with the proposed Aim.

Most of the main comments have already been addressed in Common Themes. In general respondents reiterated the international importance of Northern Ireland's seabird populations, and the main threats and pressures they face which were cited as climate change and HPAI.

10% of respondents disagreed with the proposed Aim, believing the language was too vague and unambitious.

Departmental response

The Department is encouraged by the broad support for the Aim and notes comments on the urgent need for action.

Objectives and Actions

The strategy laid out six proposed objectives with associated actions to achieve these. Consultees were asked if they agreed with the objectives and if the associated actions were sufficient. Many of the most common suggestions have been summarised in the [Common Themes](#) section.

Objective 1

Collate existing evidence from all seabird monitoring efforts in Northern Ireland and continue to review and update these data as new evidence becomes available.

93% of respondents strongly agreed with Objective 1.

There was recognition that collating existing evidence was a foundation for informed conservation and management decisions.

Action 1.1

1.1	Complete a data-mining exercise of all available records by June 2025.
-----	---

80% of respondents agreed that Action 1.1 was sufficient to meet Objective 1.

The main comments received under this objective and its action are summarised in the Common Themes section ([Monitoring and Data Collection](#)).

Respondents suggested this action could be strengthened to address data gaps and suggested including an annex or completing a mapping exercise to list completed, ongoing and future datasets.

Departmental response

The Department agrees that data accessibility is vital for enabling seabird conservation, as outlined above in the [Monitoring and Data Collection](#) section. The Department will explore

with the Advisory Group how best to display completed and proposed datasets, keeping these updated as new evidence emerges.

Objective 2

Identify the knowledge gaps to enhance the evidence base and data availability of seabird distribution and populations.

93% of respondents agreed with this Objective.

This Objective was seen as essential for improving understanding of seabird ecology and informing management decisions. There were suggestions to streamline this objective with the related data Objective 1.

Actions 2.1 – 2.2

2.1	Collate evidence on seabird distributions and combine with foraging distances to give an indication of at-sea usage by June 2025
2.2	Assess the knowledge base of at-sea distributions and identify how and where it can be improved.

77% of respondents agreed that the actions were sufficient to meet Objective 2.

Comments against Action 2.2 agreed that it was important to close knowledge gaps in at-sea distributions, but also in under-represented locations, and with regards to productivity data. Recognition of the challenges in obtaining robust baseline data were also highlighted.

Respondents believed that foraging distributions should be supported by greater data collection at all trophic levels in marine habitats i.e. prey species. Some also highlighted the need to also address non-breeding season distributions.

Departmental Response

The Department will review Objectives 1 and 2 in response to comments regarding streamlining these into one objective focused on evidence.

The Department agrees with the responses regarding knowledge gaps and will work with stakeholders to bridge these through various programmes, as outlined in Common Themes ([Representative and Collaborative Co-Delivery of the Strategy and Action Plan](#) and [Long-term Funding](#)). Other routes include continued partnership with researchers who produce reports for DAERA, such as the recently published Marine Bird Evidence Review ¹¹.

The Department will also seek to further strengthen at-sea data in collaboration with offshore wind industry and regulators through U.K. wide steering groups.

Objective 3

Integrate the potential impacts of threats and pressures on seabirds into future management and decision making.

90% of respondents agreed with Objective 3.

Respondents that disagreed felt that the Objective was vague and that they needed further engagement and clarity on how this could be actioned before agreement. Some respondents believed that stakeholders should be required, rather than encouraged, to consider sensitivities to pressures and threats.

Action 3.1

3.1	Review vulnerability/ sensitivity assessments from FeAST (Feature Activity Sensitivity Tool, as developed by Nature Scot) for certain species, and resolve where missing.
-----	--

55% of respondents agreed that Action 3.1 was sufficient to achieve the objective.

Respondents supported a coordinated approach with Scotland and England, where FeAST is already being used, with some requests that FeAST assessments are undertaken for all large-scale coastal projects. There were concerns however, that by waiting for completion of the evidence-based Objectives (1, 2 and 3) the implementation of further objectives in the strategy would be delayed.

¹¹ Hereward, H.F.R., El Haddad, H., Humphreys, E.M., Taylor, R.C. & Upton, A.J. 2025. BTO Northern Ireland Marine Bird Evidence Review 2024: marine bird spatial use in the Celtic Seas. *BTO Research Report 792*: British Trust for Ornithology, Thetford, UK

Other respondents noted that the FeAST tool makes potential assumptions about perceived threats and requested greater stakeholder involvement when reviewing to make these specific to Northern Ireland.

Departmental Response

There is no statutory obligation to apply the FeAST tool. However, it is useful for developers and stakeholders to use to determine what potential vulnerabilities seabirds are facing and for the development of management measures that may be required at a protected site level.

With regard to completion of objectives, the intention is that these will be implemented concurrently rather than chronologically.

The Department recognises the concerns raised about the Scotland-focused design of FeAST and will address this through actions in the strategy to develop sensitivity tool tailored specifically to Northern Ireland.

Objective 4

Identify and deliver targeted management measures to aid the recovery of seabirds and the wider ecosystem upon which they rely.

94% of respondents agreed with Objective 4.

Many respondents identified this Objective and its actions as the core of the strategy and emphasised its close links with Objectives 2 and 3.

Actions 4.1 - 4.11

4.1	Complete a prioritisation exercise to identify which seabirds and associated breeding habitats (whether coastal or inshore) require urgent measures for protection and recovery.
4.2	Identify the appropriate conservation measures required for each seabird breeding habitat (whether coastal or inshore), with particular focus on low-lying islands prone to erosion and flooding.

4.3	Identify which seabird breeding islands would benefit from invasive mammalian predator eradication programmes.
4.4	Identify sites which have issues with predation by native predators.
4.5	Identify sites which have issues with disturbance and develop appropriate management measures.
4.6	Identify appropriate management measures for seabird prey and foraging areas, in consultation with stakeholders.
4.7	Improve the evidence base for seabird interaction with fishing vessels in Northern Ireland waters to identify levels of seabird bycatch.
4.8	Improve response to the emergence, spread and impacts of disease and parasites in seabirds.
4.9	Reduce marine litter and improve understanding of impacts on seabirds in Northern Ireland.
4.10	Continued work towards Good Environmental Status for contaminants and reduction of the impacts of contaminants on seabirds.
4.11	Identification of funding streams and mechanisms to enable the delivery of the above actions.

67% agreed the actions listed were sufficient to deliver Objective 4.

Many respondents welcomed the broad range of practical actions proposed to enhance seabird populations and resilience. Some respondents suggested additional actions to help achieve this Objective.

Respondents sought clarity on who would be responsible for delivering these actions and the identification of funding and targets to ensure success.

Some respondents requested more detail such as targeted/named sites for predator control or timescales for implementing new bycatch monitoring technology. This tied in with some concerns that the actions as drafted were too broad and could therefore cause unintended consequences for businesses and communities. Respondents also recommended including management assessments to evaluate its effectiveness and to support the application of adaptive management principles.

Departmental Response

Some actions proposed by stakeholders are already being undertaken through other mechanisms or carried out under various other strategies being implemented by the Department for example, Plastic Pollution Plan for Northern Ireland¹² or the Lough Neagh Action Plan¹³.

Many of the more detailed suggestions by respondents, including the allocation of delivery partners, would not be appropriate for the strategy at this time, given its high-level focus. Further discussion and progress towards delivering these actions will occur during the implementation phase with co-operation with the NI Seabird Conservation Strategy Advisory Group.

The Department acknowledges the points requesting more detail on these actions and will review and will create a new objective to address the assessment of management measures.

Objective 5

Bring all stakeholders and the public together to raise awareness of the importance of seabirds in Northern Ireland, and Northern Ireland's importance on a wider scale across the British Isles.

96% of respondents agreed with Objective 5.

¹² <https://www.daera-ni.gov.uk/consultations/public-consultation-plastic-pollution-plan-northern-ireland>

¹³ <https://www.daera-ni.gov.uk/publications/lough-neagh-report-and-action-plan>

Action 5.1

5.1	Promote the Seabird Conservation Strategy, accompanied by an effective engagement and communications workstream
-----	--

93% of respondents agreed this action was sufficient to meet the Objective.

Most of the comments, and associated Departmental Response, that were raised have been detailed in the Common Themes section ([Education and Engagement](#)).

There was broad agreement that raising awareness is essential for seabird conservation to build both public and political support for the strategy. Respondents emphasised the cultural and heritage value of seabirds and how this could be valuable in tourism and recreational sectors. Public engagement proposals included funding for citizen science, creation of an annual communication plan and the creation of an annual event to promote Northern Irish seabirds.

Departmental Response

The Department welcomes the suggestions to expand the scope of this objective and will address this in the final strategy.

Objective 6

Conduct a review of the strategy every six years, with the ability to change species scope to reflect environmental change and species distribution where appropriate.

74% of respondents agreed with Objective 6.

Action 6.1

6.1	Review the Seabird Conservation Strategy every six years following publication.
-----	--

58% of respondents agreed the action was sufficient to deliver the Objective.

Comments under this question were addressed in the [Protected Areas](#) and [Urgency and Delivery Timeframe](#) themes.

Next steps

The Department is grateful for all the responses received to the consultation and will address the requests for greater clarity and alignment within the final Seabird Conservation Strategy and Action Plan. Specifically, the Department will:

- Incorporate the agreed Departmental Responses into the new Seabird Conservation Strategy and Action Plan.
- Create a new objective to monitor and assess the effectiveness of introduced management measures.
- Ensure alignment with the NI Environmental Improvement Plan, the other UK-wide seabird strategies, and the OSPAR Regional Action Plan for Marine Birds in the North-East Atlantic (2024-2030).

ANNEX A – Species Scope and Rationale

Table 1 lists the 27 species of seabird that were included in the public consultation. These species require active conservation action, having all been included in the most recent assessment of the Birds of Conservation Concern in Ireland (Gilbert et al., 2021¹⁴).

Six species are on the red list (Kittiwake, Common Eider, Razorbill, Common Scoter, Slavonian Grebe and Puffin), and one species is on the green list (Great Black-backed Gull). The remaining 20 are on the amber list, of medium conservation concern.

Initial focus was on seabirds that currently breed in the Northern Ireland area as listed in the BTO and NIEA Northern Ireland Seabird Report, regularly occurring species in Northern Ireland waters from breeding sites in Scotland and the Republic of Ireland and designated wintering waterbirds occurring in Marine Protected Areas within Northern Ireland. In addition, 10 of the 21 extant breeding seabirds in Northern Ireland are listed as Northern Ireland Priority Species¹⁵, which means that these species are of principal importance for the purpose of conserving biodiversity in Northern Ireland. Further refinement came from the workshops held with the NI Seabird Conservation Strategy Advisory Group and as a result of the public consultation, which saw the addition of one new species Little Tern, *Sternula albifrons*.

It should be noted that even if a species is not named within this list, they may still benefit from the management measures put in place for the habitat on which other named species rely.

In addition to using the data from SMP and WeBS, other sources included NBN Atlas records, foraging ranges from colonies and modelling research. Where feasible, data for each of the species were overlaid with activities data to identify any potential pressures or threats, which was then addressed in the actions. Data availability and quality varied between species and sites, resulting in knowledge gaps; there was a significant gap in seabird-at-sea data where human activities were occurring (fishing, recreation), especially within the inshore (<12m) fishing fleet. This limited the potential to perform vulnerability/ sensitivity

¹⁴ Gilbert, G., Stanbury, A. and Lewis, L (2021) Birds of Conservation Concern in Ireland 2020-2026. Irish Birds 9:523-544

¹⁵ [List of Northern Ireland priority species 2023 | Department of Agriculture, Environment and Rural Affairs](#)

assessments, so this was therefore drafted into its own action.

Table 1: List of key seabird and marine birds in Northern Ireland included in the public consultation

Common Name	Scientific Name	Functional Group
Arctic Tern	<i>Sterna paradisaea</i>	Surface Feeder
Common Tern	<i>Sterna hirundo</i>	
Roseate Tern	<i>Sterna dougallii</i>	
Sandwich Tern	<i>Thalasseus sandvicensis</i>	
European Storm Petrel	<i>Hydrobates pelagicus</i>	
Great Skua	<i>Stercorarius skua</i>	
Northern Fulmar	<i>Fulmarus glacialis</i>	
Black-Legged Kittiwake	<i>Rissa tridactyla</i>	Surface Feeder/ Water Column Feeder
Manx Shearwater	<i>Puffinus puffinus</i>	
Gannet	<i>Morus bassanus</i>	Wading/ Surface Feeder
Black Headed Gull	<i>Chroicocephalus ridibundus</i>	
Common Gull	<i>Larus canus</i>	
Great Black-backed Gull	<i>Larus marinus</i>	
Herring Gull	<i>Larus argentatus</i>	
Lesser Black-backed Gull	<i>Larus fuscus</i>	
Mediterranean Gull	<i>Ichthyaetus melanocephalus</i>	
Atlantic Puffin	<i>Fratercula arctica</i>	Water Column Feeder
Black Guillemot	<i>Cephus grylle</i>	
Common Guillemot	<i>Uria aalge</i>	
Razorbill	<i>Alca torda</i>	
European Shag	<i>Phalacrocorax aristotelis</i>	Water Column Feeder/ Benthic Feeder
Great Cormorant	<i>Phalacrocorax carbo</i>	
Great crested grebe	<i>Podiceps cristatus</i>	
Red throated diver	<i>Gavia stellata</i>	
Slavonian Grebe	<i>Podiceps auritus</i>	
Common Eider	<i>Somateria mollissima</i>	Benthic/ Water Column Feeder
Common Scoter	<i>Melanitta nigra</i>	

For further information:

Marine Conservation
DAERA Marine and Fisheries Division
Clare House
303 Airport Road West
Sydenham Intake
BT3 9ED

Email: MarineConservation@daera-ni.gov.uk

www.daera-ni.gov.uk



Department of
**Agriculture, Environment
and Rural Affairs**

An Roinn

**Talmhaíochta, Comhshaoil
agus Gnóthaí Tuaithe**

Depairtment o'

**Fairmin, Environment
an' Kintra Matthers**

www.daera-ni.gov.uk

INVESTORS IN PEOPLE®
We invest in people Standard