NPWS

Galway Bay Complex SAC
(site code: 000268)

Conservation objectives supporting document - coastal habitats

Version 1 - supplement 1

June 2026

IMPORTANT: This supplement, published in 2026, includes details relating to the EU habitat **1230 Vegetated sea cliffs of the Atlantic and Baltic Coasts** which was added as a Qualifying Interest for the site after the Site-Specific Conservation Objectives (Version 1) were published. This document should be read in conjunction with the Version 2 Site-Specific Conservation Objectives (NPWS, 2026), and with the Conservation objectives supporting document - Coastal habitats Version 1 (NPWS, 2013). Any references to this habitat in previously published Site-specific Conservation Objectives (SSCO), or SSCO supporting documents, including the mapping, are to be considered **superseded** by these updates.

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1. Introduction

1230 Vegetated sea cliffs of the Atlantic and Baltic Coasts was added as a Qualifying Interest to Galway Bay Complex SAC (site code: 000268) after the Site-Specific Conservation Objectives (Version 1) were published. This document sets out the SSCO(s) for the newly listed Qualifying Interest(s) for the site and acts as a supplement to the original SSCO Supporting Document.

2. Coastal habitats

2.1 1230 Vegetated sea cliffs of the Atlantic and Baltic Coasts

2.1.1 Site description of habitat

At Rusheen, soft coastal cliffs rise to heights of over 10 metres and support areas of coastal grassland with generally sparse vegetation. The plant community includes species such as Sea Plantain (*Plantago maritima*), Creeping Bent (*Agrostis stolonifera*), False Oat-grass (*Arrhenatherum elatius*), Cock's-foot (*Dactylis glomerata*), Red Fescue (*Festuca rubra*), and Common Bird's-foot-trefoil (*Lotus corniculatus*), together with lichens, including *Ramalina* species and *Xanthoria parietina*. These cliffs are regarded as an excellent example of Ireland's comparatively uncommon soft-cliff coastal habitat (NPWS, 2015).

2.1.2 Overall objective

The overall objective for '*Vegetated sea cliffs of the Atlantic and Baltic Coasts'* in Galway Bay Complex SAC (site code: 000268) is to '*restore the Favourable conservation condition*'.

This objective is based on an assessment of the recorded condition of the habitat(s) under a range of attributes and targets. The assessment is divided into three main headings: (a) Area (b) Range and (c) Structure and Functions. This conservation objective applies to the total extent of this habitat within the SAC, including but not limited to the mapped areas of this habitat.

2.1.3 Area (extent)

Habitat length

Coastal habitats are generally dynamic and increase and decrease in area due to natural processes. These natural changes are not taken into account in conservation status assessments. Changes associated with human activities including destruction and restoration do contribute to the assessment of conservation status.

As cliffs are linear features on maps, their extent is measured in kilometres rather than hectares, as for other habitats.

The total area (length) of cliff habitat that has been mapped within the SAC boundary is 3.70km.

Target: Area (length) stable or increasing, subject to natural processes, including erosion.

2.1.4 Range

Habitat Distribution

Soft maritime cliffs occur in a limited but significant distribution at Rusheen within the Galway Bay Complex SAC. The habitat is confined to short sections of coastline where cliffs exceed 10m in height and support sparse maritime grassland communities. Although restricted in extent, these cliffs represent a highly characteristic example of Ireland's rare soft-cliff habitat.

Target: No decline, subject to natural processes.

2.1.5 Structure and Functions

Structure and Functions for Vegetated sea cliffs are assessed on the basis of:

Physical structure: functionality and hydrological regime

Target: No alteration to natural functioning of geomorphological and hydrological processes, including groundwater quality, due to artificial structures.

For this target to be met, the natural geomorphological processes should be functioning without impediment, including erosion and slumping. Hydrological regime and groundwater quality should be unimpaired and natural hydrological features should be intact, including seepages, springs and flushes.

Vegetation structure: zonation

Target: Unimpaired natural range of sea cliff habitat zonations including transitional zones, subject to natural processes, including erosion and succession.

The range of sea cliff zonations for the site should be intact, subject to natural processes, including erosion and succession. Transitions to other habitats at the cliff-top and cliff-base should also be intact.

Vegetation structure: vegetation height

Target: Naturally occurring structural variation within sward.

Vegetation height should be varied to support a wide range of biodiversity, and grazing can be part of the management used to achieve this.

Vegetation composition: typical species and sub-communities

Target: Unimpaired natural range of sub-communities with typical species listed in the Irish Sea Cliff Survey (Barron *et al*., 2011).

Typical flora of vegetated sea cliffs should be present, as are the range of sub-communities within the different zones.

Vegetation composition: negative indicator species

Target: Negative indicator species (including non-natives) represent less than 5% cover.

Vegetation composition: Bracken and woody species

Target: Cover of Bracken (*Pteridium aquilinum*) on grassland and/or heath less than 10%. Cover of woody species on grassland and or heath less than 20%.

The Structure and Functions were not in good condition. Typical cliff communities comprising herbaceous vegetation and shrubs were present, but the invasive species Montbretia (*Crocosmia* x *crocosmiiflora*) was recorded during the conservation assessment. The pressures at the site were erosion, flooding and rising precipitation, paths, tracks, and cycling tracks. The Future prospects were described as good but overall the site requires restoration (Barron *et al*., 2011).

3. References

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Appendix 1 – Distribution map of Vegetated sea cliffs of the Atlantic and Baltic Coasts in Galway Bay Complex SAC (000268)

