NPWS

Gweedore Bay and Islands SAC
(site code: 001141)

Conservation objectives supporting document - coastal habitats

Version 1 - supplement 1

July 2026

IMPORTANT: This supplement, published in 2026, includes details relating to the EU habitats **1230 Vegetated sea cliffs of the Atlantic and Baltic coasts and 1330 Atlantic salt meadows (Glauco-Puccinellietalia maritimae)** which were added as Qualifying Interests 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, 2015). Any references to these habitats in previously published Site-specific Conservation Objectives (SSCO), or SSCO supporting documents, including the mapping, are to be considered **superseded** by these updates.

Contents

1. Introduction 1

2. Coastal habitats 1

2.1 1230 Vegetated sea cliffs of the Atlantic and Baltic coasts 1

2.1.1 Site description of habitat 1

2.1.2 Overall objective 1

2.1.3 Area (extent) 1

2.1.4 Range 2

2.1.5 Structure and Functions 2

2.2 1330 Atlantic salt meadows (Glauco-Puccinellietalia maritimae) 3

2.2.1 Site description of habitat 3

2.2.2 Overall objective 3

2.2.3 Area 3

2.2.4 Range 3

2.2.5 Structure and Functions 3

3. References 5

Appendix 1 – Distribution map of Vegetated sea cliffs of the Atlantic and Baltic coasts in Gweedore Bay and Islands SAC (site code 001141) 6

Appendix 2 – Distribution map of Atlantic salt meadows (Glauco-Puccinellietalia maritimae) in Gweedore Bay and Islands SAC (site code 001141) 7

Citation: NPWS (2026) Gweedore Bay and Islands SAC (site code 001141) Conservation objectives supporting document - coastal habitats V1 - supplement 1. Conservation Objectives Supporting Document Series. National Parks and Wildlife Service, Department of Housing, Local Government and Heritage, Dublin, Ireland.

1. Introduction

1230 Vegetated sea cliffs of the Atlantic and Baltic coasts and 1330 Atlantic salt meadows (Glauco-Puccinellietalia maritimae) were added as Qualifying Interests to Gweedore Bay and Islands SAC (site code 001141) 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

Gweedore Bay and Islands SAC contains a distinctive vegetated Atlantic sea-cliff habitat, forming a rugged coastal strip. The cliff habitat extends continuously from Bloody Foreland in the north to Inishinny in the south of the SAC, forming the western coastal edge of the designated area. This stretch includes sheer rock faces, sloping maritime heath, and cliff-top grasslands that provide important nesting and foraging areas for seabirds and coastal species.

Knockfolla, Inishinny, Glasagh, Carnboy, Mullaghderg, Cruit Lower, Scalpachore, Aughnish Point and Bent Island together represent a mix of hard and soft granite/granodiorite sea cliffs, generally non-calcareous in geology, with crevices as the dominant cliff-face feature and open-water cliff bases except where sand or shingle occurs (notably Knockfolla, Inishinny and Bent Island). Across the sites, soils are typically shallow, mineral, lithosolic–podzolic or peaty, with blown sand present at Inishinny and Cruit Lower. Indented coastlines and promontories occur at Glasagh, Carnboy, Mullaghderg, Scalpachore and Aughnish Point, while island or non-indented forms appear at Inishinny and Bent Island. Additional features include slope failure, erosion, gullies, outcrops and occasional sea stacks. Human pressures are limited but include roads and paths at Knockfolla and a golf course at Cruit Lower, with erosion particularly affecting softer cliff sections exposed to weather and wave action (Barron *et al*., 2011).

2.1.2 Overall objective

The overall objective for '*Vegetated sea cliffs of the Atlantic and Baltic coasts'* in Gweedore Bay and Islands SAC (site code: 001141) 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 30.74km.

No area loss due to human activities was recorded when the habitat was surveyed (Barron *et al*., 2011).

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

2.1.4 Range

Habitat Distribution

The habitat range forms a long narrow linear habitat that is exposed to the Atlantic Ocean. It consists of both hard and soft cliffs. There are also cliffs on the off shore islands.

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 habitat 1230 Vegetated sea cliffs of the Atlantic and Baltic coasts were in good condition at most stops but two areas were considerably degraded due to roads and paths, and one of the cliff areas had a golf course on top of the cliff. The current condition and Future prospects of the habitat at the site were not considered to be good. The overall conservation status of Vegetated sea cliffs of the Atlantic and Baltic coasts was assessed as Unfavourable (Barron *et al*., 2011).

2.2 1330 Atlantic salt meadows (Glauco-Puccinellietalia maritimae)

2.2.1 Site description of habitat

The saltmarsh in the Gweedore Bay and Islands SAC is found mainly in Lunniagh and Keadew. Keadew is a medium-sized saltmarsh. The main saltmarsh habitat is 1330 Atlantic salt meadows (Glauco-Puccinellietalia maritimae). The locally distinctive Saltmarsh Flat-sedge (*Blysmus rufus)* occurs at both sites (Brophy *et al*., 2018).

2.2.2 Overall objective

The overall objective for '*Atlantic salt meadows (Glauco-Puccinellietalia maritimae)'* in Gweedore Bay and Islands SAC (site code: 001141) 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.

The baseline survey for this habitat is McCorry and Ryle (2009).

2.2.3 Area

Habitat area

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.

The total area of 1330 Atlantic salt meadows (Glauco-Puccinellietalia maritimae) that have been mapped within the SAC boundary is 50.11ha (Brophy *et al*., 2018).

Loss of habitat has been noted in the surveys and this was associated with human activities at the site such as access by motorised vehicles and grazing. Restoration is therefore required.

Target: Area stable or increasing, subject to natural processes, including erosion and succession.

2.2.4 Range

Habitat distribution

At Lunniagh this site consists of saltmarsh distributed throughout a bay directly west of Derrybeg, and in a bay west of Bunbeg, Co. Donegal. The saltmarsh habitat is distributed within a north-west facing inlet in Keadue and Belcruit townlands, Co. Donegal.

Target: No decline in the distribution of this habitat, unless it is the result of natural processes.

2.2.5 Structure and Functions

Structure and Functions for Atlantic salt meadows (Glauco-Puccinellietalia maritimae) are assessed on the basis of:

Physical structure: hydrology

Target: Natural hydrology and processes of erosion and succession intact, no disturbance to creek and pan structure, as compared to baseline data.

Disturbed ground

Target: Less than 5% disturbed ground at 75% of stops or more.

Signs of negative activities *e.g.* infilling, reclamation, turf-cutting, pollution

Target: None recorded.

Vegetation structure: zonation

Target: Adequate number of zones present, depending on geographical type of saltmarsh.

Vegetation structure: spatial transitions

Target: No loss of natural transitions relative to baseline.

Vegetation structure: plant height

Target: Standard deviation of median plant height in monitoring stops is greater than 5cm.

Vegetation composition: typical species (positive indicators)

Target: Minimum of 12 typical species recorded across all plots.

Vegetation composition: negative indicator species

Target: Percentage *Spartina* spp. cover, or other negative species, within 5m radius of stop less than/equal to SMP baseline at 75% of stops or more.

Vegetation composition: negative indicator species: presence of *Spartina* spp. within vicinity of habitat

Target: Not present where not recorded by baseline.

Indicators of local distinctiveness: site-specific target features (including rare and notable species)

Target: No evidence of decline since designation.

The Structure and Functions of 1330 Atlantic salt meadows (Glauco-Puccinellietalia maritimae) were found to be in poor condition due to the presence of disturbed ground at both Keadew and Lunniagh. The main pressures at the sites were motorised vehicles and grazing. The Future prospects of the site were poor (Brophy *et al*., 2018).

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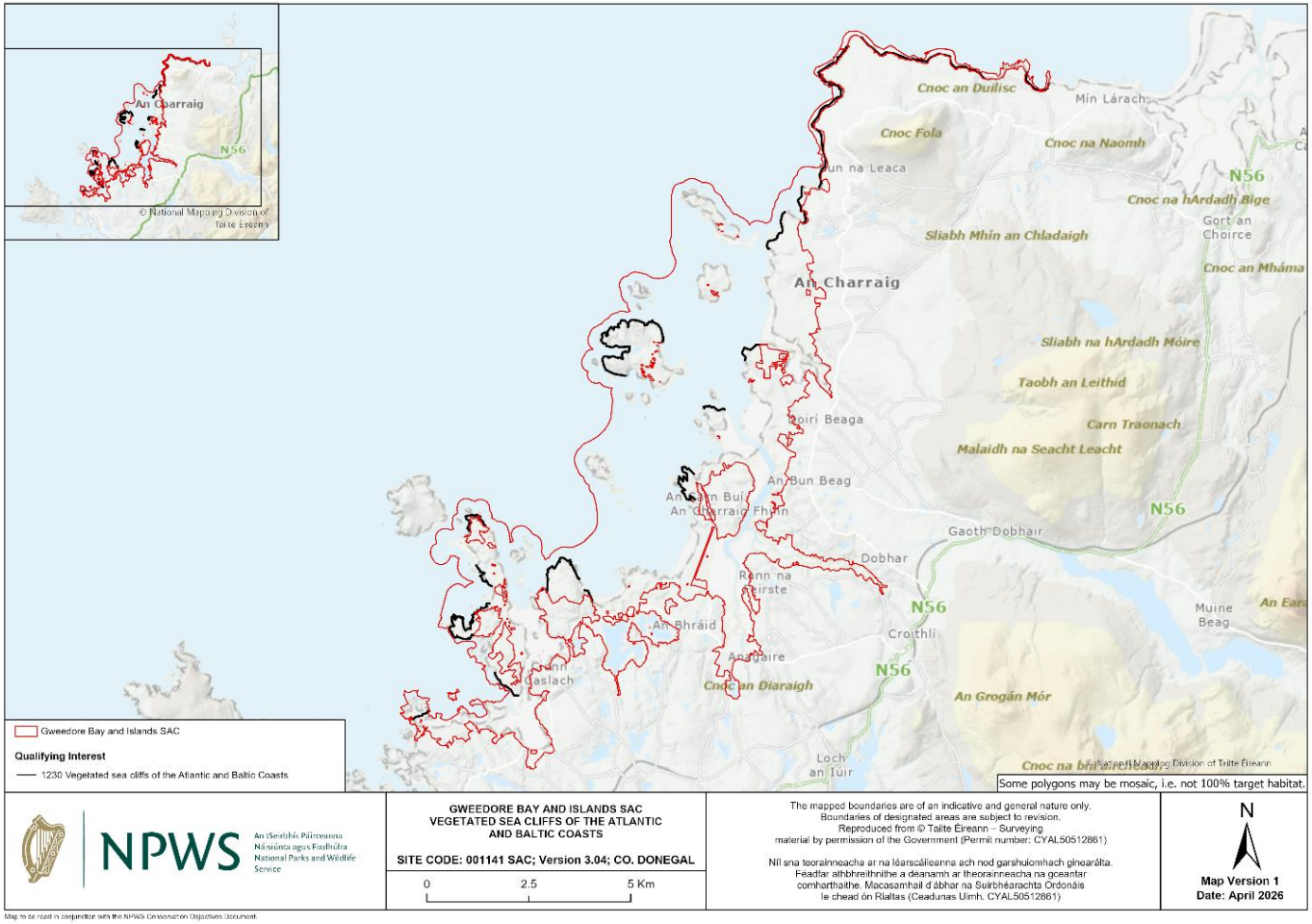
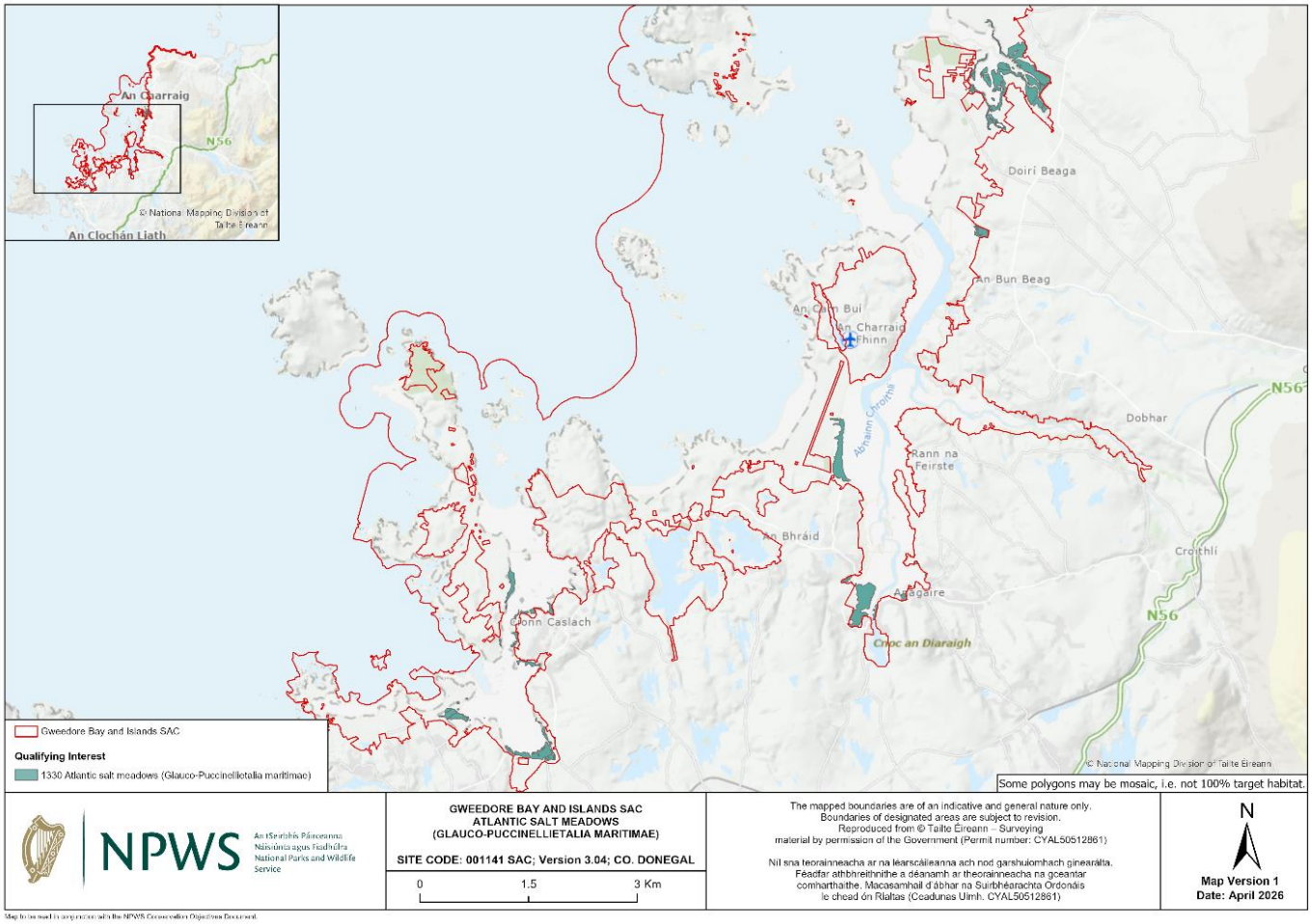
Appendix 1 – Distribution map of Vegetated sea cliffs of the Atlantic and Baltic coasts in Gweedore Bay and Islands SAC (site code 001141)



Appendix 2 – Distribution map of Atlantic salt meadows (Glauco-Puccinellietalia maritimae) in Gweedore Bay and Islands SAC (site code 001141)