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# Limestone Coast of South West Wales / Arfordir Calchfaen de Orllewin Cymru Special Area of Conservation

Indicative site level feature condition assessments 2018

NRW Evidence Report No: 231

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## Summary

This document presents NRW's indicative assessment of the condition of marine features in Limestone Coast of South West Wales / Arfordir Calchfaen de Orllewin Cymru Special Area of Conservation (SAC).

**Table 1 contains a summary of the indicative condition assessments.**

This report is divided into sections as follows:

**Section 1:** a brief introduction to the importance and need for site level feature condition assessments

**Section 2:** a brief description of Limestone Coast of South West Wales SAC,

**Section 3:** NRW's indicative condition assessments for the features of Limestone Coast of South West Wales SAC, including a comparison with previous assessments for the site,

**Section 4:** NRW's plans for the future development of site level condition assessments,

**Annexes** explain in detail the process of producing indicative condition assessments.

**Table 1:** Summary of indicative condition assessments for Limestone Coast of South West Wales SAC.

Designated Features	Indicative condition assessment	Confidence in assessment
<ul style="list-style-type: none"><li>Submerged or partially submerged sea caves</li></ul>	Unknown	Not applicable

More detailed explanations of the rationale behind these conclusions can be found in the full indicative condition assessment report in section 3.

## Crynodeb

Mae'r ddogfen hon yn cyflwyno asesiad dangosol CNC o gyflwr nodweddion Ardal Gadwraeth Arbennig Arfordir Calchfaen de Orllewin Cymru (AGA).

**Mae Tabl 1 yn cynnwys crynodeb o'r asesiadau dangosol o gyflwr nodweddion.**

Rhennir yr adroddiad hwn yn adrannau fel a ganlyn:

**Adran 1:** cyflwyniad byr i'r pwysigrwydd a'r angen am asesiadau cyflwr ar lefel safle

**Adran 2:** disgrifiad byr o AGA Arfordir Calchfaen de Orllewin Cymru

**Adran 3:** Asesiadau cyflwr dangosol CNC ar gyfer nodweddion AGA Arfordir Calchfaen de Orllewin Cymru, gan gynnwys cymhariaeth gydag asesiadau blaenorol ar gyfer y safle

**Adran 4:** Cynlluniau CNC ar gyfer datblygu asesiadau cyflwr ar lefel safle yn y dyfodol

Mae **atodiadau'n** egluro'n fanwl y broses o gynhyrchu asesiadau dangosol o gyflwr nodweddion.

**Tabl 1:** Crynodeb o asesiadau dangosol o gyflwr nodweddion ar gyfer AGA Arfordir Calchfaen de Orllewin Cymru.

Nodweddion Dynodedig	Asesiad dangosol o gyflwr y nodwedd	Hyder yn yr asesiad
<ul style="list-style-type: none"><li>Ogofâu môr sy'n danforol neu'n lleddanforol</li></ul>	Anhysbys	Ddim yn berthnasol

Mae esboniadau manylach o'r rhesymeg y tu ôl i'r casgliadau hyn i'w gweld yn yr adroddiad llawn ar asesu dangosol cyflwr nodweddion.

## 1. Site level feature condition assessments

Site level feature condition assessments are important for site management. In particular they:

- inform the development of management measures to improve the condition of features
- assist with the prioritisation of resources, and
- help with the assessments of plans and projects.

Marine special areas of conservation (SACs) in Wales cover extensive areas of sea and coast, much of which is challenging and resource intensive to monitor. As a result, assessment of condition can be difficult. It is therefore necessary to use a number of different sources of information and data to inform conclusions. These can vary from, for example, long-term monitoring/surveillance datasets, sampling programs and bathymetric data, to specific data-sets collected primarily for other purposes including Environmental Impact Assessments. For some features, there are very little or no data from which to draw conclusions.

NRW previously undertook preliminary work on full, detailed assessments using all available evidence and assessing all possible attributes. However, this process proved complex and resource intensive. We have therefore concluded that we will not be able to undertake this type of extensive assessment now or in the future, but instead we will develop a new serviceable and streamlined approach that can be embedded in our internal assessment and reporting tools and processes.

As the first stage in developing ongoing streamlined and sustainable site condition assessment and reporting, NRW has undertaken indicative assessments of condition of all marine SAC and Special Protection Area (SPA) sites and features in Wales. During an intensive workshop NRW specialists assessed each feature by using readily available data and information and applying their expert judgement. Further details on the approach taken can be found in Annexes A and B, summary definition in Box 1.

### **Box 1: Indicative condition assessments - definition and use**

The term 'indicative condition assessment' describes the use of readily available evidence and expert judgement in an intensive, collective workshop process to provide an indication of feature condition at the site level.

The confidence rating associated with the assessments is an **integral** part of the indicative assessment. Confidence levels for feature assessments should therefore **always** be quoted alongside the indicative condition result, together with NRW's definition of 'indicative condition assessment'.

## 2. Site Description

The Limestone Coast of South West Wales SAC comprises a series of SSSI's stretching from Castlemartin at the western end of southern Pembrokeshire to the Bishopston Valley on the south-east coast of Gower. The Carboniferous Limestone sea-cliffs include exposed and sheltered elevations, up to 50 metres high in places, with numerous caves, arches, crevices and blow-holes.

The site has several terrestrial, coastal and species features<sup>1</sup> with one marine feature:

- Submerged or partially submerged sea caves.

The feature is distributed throughout the SAC, the SAC boundary and conservation advice can be found through the designated sites search on the NRW website<sup>2</sup>.

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<sup>1</sup> The terrestrial and coastal features have not been assessed through this process.

<sup>2</sup> <http://naturalresources.wales/guidance-and-advice/environmental-topics/wildlife-and-biodiversity/find-protected-areas-of-land-and-seas/designated-sites/?lang=en>



### 3. Feature level indicative condition assessments

#### 3.1 Submerged or partially submerged sea caves indicative condition assessment

*The indicative condition of the feature at this site at the time of assessment*

<b>Date</b>	May 2017
<b>Site name</b>	Limestone Coast of South West Wales/ Arfordir Calchfaen de Orllewin Cymru
<b>Site feature assessed</b>	Submerged or partially submerged sea caves

<b>Component of habitat feature assessed</b>	<b>Indicative Assessment</b> <i>(Favourable, unfavourable, unknown)</i>	<b>Key evidence type used</b> <i>(Monitoring data, reports or expert judgement)</i>	<b>Level of agreement</b>	<b>Confidence in evidence</b>	<b>Component confidence level</b>
Distribution & Extent (within site)	Favourable	Expert judgement, monitoring report	High	Low	Low
Structure & function	Unknown	Expert judgement	High	Not applicable	Not applicable
Typical species	Unknown	Expert judgement	High	Not applicable	Not applicable
Relevant activities <i>(activities directly impacting condition of the feature on this site)</i>	No activities identified as having a direct impact on feature condition.				

<b>Overall Indicative Assessment</b>	<b>Overall Confidence level</b>
Unknown	Not applicable

**Notes section:** *The rationale for the assessment conclusion and confidence.*

**Distribution & Extent:** Based on the original surveys in 2002 (Bunker & Holt, 2003) the distribution and extent is thought not to have changed since designation. Therefore, this component has been assessed as **favourable**.

**Structure & Function, Typical species:** To the assessors' knowledge there have been no further surveys of sea caves since 2002, therefore with the exception of distribution and extent they cannot conclude anything except "unknown" for structure and function and typical species.

The only Performance Indicator (indicator for assessment and reporting) set in the site's management plan for the sea cave feature is as follows:

**Access and Recreation:** The caves are currently accessible to climbers and water users

Upper limit: No public access allowed

Lower limit: None set

No assessment of the use of this feature by climbers or water users has been made.

Therefore, these components have been assessed as **unknown**.

Although distribution and extent has been assessed as favourable since there have been no surveys since 2002 the overall assessment for this feature on this site has been assessed as **unknown**.

**Evidence used:** *The evidence used to support the assessment conclusion.*

- Bunker, F.StP.D. & Holt, R.H.F., (2003). Surveys of sea caves in Welsh Special Areas of Conservation. CCW Marine Monitoring Report No: 6 pp 97. Countryside Council for Wales.

### 3.2 Comparison with previous assessments

The indicative condition assessments were compared to previous assessments for these features at the site level carried out between 2005 – 2007. The earlier assessments were carried out in more detail and different data and evidence sources were sometimes used; as a result, current and previous assessments are not directly comparable, although they do both give an indication of the condition of the feature at the time of assessment.

Feature	2005 - 07 assessments	2017 indicative assessments
Submerged or partially submerged sea caves	Favourable	Unknown

## 4. Future development of site level assessments

Following this full round of indicative site condition assessments, we are now developing a permanent, sustainable, site level feature condition reporting process that can be delivered on a regular basis. We are planning a series of projects to work towards this goal. It is unlikely that resources and suitable evidence sources will all be available at any given time to monitor and report on all features, or to report to the same level of confidence. Our aim, however, is to develop, over the coming few years, an assessment and reporting process that is of practical use in informing effective site management for the maintenance or improvement of feature and site condition.

## Annex A: Process used to produce indicative condition assessments

The process to produce indicative feature condition assessments at the site level centred around a workshop approach that applied readily available evidence and expert judgement to provide an *indication* of features condition. Figure A1 summarises the process of producing indicative condition assessments, and Figure A2 provides a summary definition of NRW's meaning of indicative site level feature condition assessments and advice on how they should be used.

**Figure A1:** Summary of the procedure undertaken

### Stages undertaken to produce indicative site level condition assessment reports for Welsh European marine sites (EMS)

1. Indicative condition assessment workshop
2. Standardisation of indicative feature assessments across different sites
3. Standardised feature assessments sent out internally for comment
4. Issues with individual assessments resolved
5. Features assessments re-issued to internal staff for final comments.
6. Final draft indicative feature-level condition assessments produced
7. Internal sign-off \* - draft indicative feature-level condition assessments
8. External quality assurance of draft indicative feature-level condition assessments
9. Changes made to assessments arising from quality assurance stage
10. Production of site-level reports containing indicative assessments and guidance for interpretation and use of indicative assessments
11. Final Internal sign-off \*\* - final site-level reports

\* 1<sup>st</sup> internal sign-off by a dedicated task & finish group for the work

\*\* Final internal sign-off by the task & finish group and then the Marine Programme Board

**Figure A2:** Summary definition of indicative site condition assessment.

### Indicative condition assessments: Definition and use

The term 'indicative condition assessment' describes the use of readily available evidence and expert judgement in an intensive, collective workshop process to provide an indication of feature condition at the site level.

The confidence rating associated with the assessments is an **integral** part of the indicative assessment. Confidence levels for feature assessments should therefore **always** be quoted alongside the indicative condition result, together with NRW's definition of 'indicative condition assessment'.

## A.1 Indicative condition assessment workshop

Existing readily available data and information was collated and an organisation-wide workshop held with NRW's specialists. By using the evidence available at the workshop and applying expert judgement, staff examined each feature for each site and drew indicative conclusions on condition. A total of 69 assessments were carried out; 66 within the workshop and a further three, for otter, following the workshop, to accommodate staff availability.

### A.1.1 Assessment templates

Assessment templates were produced in advance of the workshop. These templates differed slightly depending on the feature type. In all cases the assessments were broken down into different components that were assessed separately. To assist with the workshop assessment process, staff populated the templates with relevant information before the workshop.

The templates included a notes section for providing more information on the component assessments, and an evidence section for listing the information used to inform the assessments – this was not, however, a full reference list.

### A.1.2 Confidence levels

Guidance on the confidence levels to use for the assessments was produced before the workshop (Annex B).

### A.1.3 Guidelines agreed at the workshop

At the beginning of the workshop the assessment approach was discussed and the following guidelines were agreed:

- 'Baseline' is considered to be the state at the time of designation – unless there is a recovery target in the conservation objectives. This means that significant modifications at the site before designation should not be taken into consideration unless there was a recovery target in the conservation objective for that feature at that site.
- The indicative condition is based on current knowledge and is based on the present i.e. the date of the assessment - but significant future concerns should be noted.
- If one attribute of the condition assessment is unfavourable, then the whole assessment is judged to be unfavourable ('one out, all out') unless there is a good reason to diverge from this. This is standard practice for NRW's Water Framework Directive (WFD) assessment processes as well as for terrestrial sites.
- Small-scale local known impacts should not necessarily result in a conclusion of unfavourable condition, but impacts should be noted.
- Assessments where there are 'unknowns' do not necessarily lead to a conclusion of unfavourable condition.
- There can be an overall 'unknown' conclusion where there is no information available to make the assessment.
- Nested features should be related to each other in the assessments. For example, an estuary feature in a site might encompass other named features. For example, in Pembrokeshire Marine SAC, the estuary feature also encompasses the mudflats and sandflats feature and the Atlantic saltmeadows feature.
- Where there is limited data an assessment should be made but the lack of data should be reflected in the confidence score.

- Any activities, developments or management measures that are having either positive or negative impacts should be noted in the assessments.
- Context on the indicative assessments and confidence ratings should always accompany the release of the conclusions on site level feature condition.

#### **A.1.4 Post workshop processing of indicative assessments.**

All 69 assessments were then taken through a process of developing them from the draft assessments agreed at the workshop to finalised indicative assessments contained within site level reports (Figure A1).

## **A.2 Use of best, readily available evidence**

During the collation exercise and the workshop the best readily available evidence was used. Confidence ratings were applied to the evidence used for each component of the assessment (the guidance on these confidence levels can be found in Annex B). Three main sources of evidence were available before and during the workshop:

- Site-level monitoring data
- WFD Waterbody Assessments
- Activities information

In addition, expert judgement was a key part of the assessment process, drawing on the knowledge, expertise and experience that staff have amassed over many years collectively, from: training and research; visiting the sites; monitoring and survey work; and the provision of advice on development planning and activities regulation at the site level.

### **A.2.1 Site level monitoring data and reports**

Monitoring is carried out on features or sub-features of our European marine sites following the UK common standards monitoring guidance. The amount of monitoring NRW carries out is, however, limited to the resources available, and hence the resultant prioritised monitoring programme does not provide monitoring data for all features.

#### *Limitations:*

Although the relevant specialists were present, the intensive workshop format did not always allow for full, detailed scrutiny of individual SAC monitoring reports for some features. Some monitoring information was therefore checked or added to after the workshop. A lack of resources to produce analysed reports on all existing monitoring data was highlighted as an issue during the workshop.

### **A.2.2 Water Framework Directive (WFD) Waterbody Assessments**

The latest relevant WFD waterbody assessments (2015<sup>3</sup>) were used during the workshop. Both Transitional and Coastal Water bodies overlap with the SAC boundaries but, in most cases, the boundaries do not match with SAC boundaries. Maps showing the water bodies can be found at the Water Watch Wales web site<sup>4</sup>.

<sup>3</sup> Environment Agency. 2015. Classification of Surface Water Bodies for the Water Framework Directive – Method Statement. Version 3.0 updated August 2014.

<sup>4</sup> <http://waterwatchwales.naturalresourceswales.gov.uk/en/>

### *Limitations:*

Although good use was made of the summary data for the waterbody assessments, and tables had been created linking the relevant waterbodies to the relevant European marine sites, complete datasets were not available for the workshop. In addition, although some mapping data was available, the data points for each monitoring element and how they related to the feature being assessed were not available for all assessments. This was due to time constraints and the number of assessments being carried out. WFD specialists were, however, available to provide expert advice during and after the workshop.

There was some discussion among assessors on the use of some WFD elements and their relevance to individual features. The mercury and brominated diphenylether (BDPE) standard used in the 2015 WFD assessments are new more stringent standards which did not need to be implemented until 2018 but nonetheless were used in the knowledge that new standards will be coming in and to be consistent between England and Wales. These new standards have not been used in the Marine Strategy Framework Directive (MSFD) habitat assessments, which instead used the OSPAR<sup>5</sup> (Oslo and Paris conventions) standards for these elements.

Since the WFD assessments had been used extensively in the NRW indicative condition assessments, the decision was made, for reasons of consistency, to use the new WFD standard. It should be noted that if NRW had used the OSPAR standard some of the component elements of the indicative condition assessments would have been favourable. As part of the next stage of further developing NRW's approach to MPA site level feature condition assessment, further work is planned to assess which standards are the most relevant to apply to the Welsh MPA network.

### **A.2.3 Activities information**

The NRW LIFE Natura 2000 (N2K) Programme<sup>6</sup> focussed on producing Prioritised Improvement Plans (PIPs) for each European site in Wales. These provided information on the pressure and threats for each feature of each site for assessors at the workshop. Staff were also available to discuss any ongoing casework<sup>7</sup> at the site level that may have impacted site condition.

### *Limitations:*

The summary data provided was useful but, due to the number of features, information on the pressures and threats was only provided in a summary form so that detailed site level information for each issue against each feature could not be explored.

However, staff with expert local knowledge were also available to discuss pressures and threats at the site, and hence available activity information and knowledge was sufficient to support the indicative assessment process.

Two types of activity information were reported by assessors in the indicative condition assessments:

**Relevant activities:** These were activities agreed during the indicative assessment process as having an impact on the condition of the feature, underpinned by evidence.

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<sup>5</sup> Oslo and Paris conventions managed by the OSPAR Commission: <https://www.ospar.org/>

<sup>6</sup> <https://naturalresources.wales/about-us/our-projects/life-n2k-wales/?lang=en>

<sup>7</sup> Casework is a term used to encompass the assessments of plans and projects on protected sites



There was no confidence rating associated with these activities or their associated impacts.

**Noted activities:** These were activities agreed during the indicative assessment process as occurring in the site, but where there is no evidence that the activity is having a direct impact on condition of the feature at that site. Noted activities may be having, or have the potential to have, an impact on feature condition, and were listed to be kept under review.

Not all activities for a site from the LIFE N2K Programme were listed in the assessments as relevant or noted activities by the assessors. The activities listed are not meant to replace the pressures and threats in the Prioritised Improvement Plans.

## Annex B: Confidence level guidance used in the site level indicative condition assessments.

### B.1 Assigning confidence to component parts of the feature assessments

An indicative assessment was made for each component part of the assessment (e.g. structure and function, or typical species). These components varied depending on which feature was being assessed.

There were three potential outcomes for the assessment for each component of condition:

- favourable,
- unfavourable or
- unknown

Each outcome was assigned a confidence level.

**Use of ‘Unknown’:** The *unknown* category was only used for the condition assessment where the evidence base was extremely low or absent, and as a result it was not possible to reach any conclusion on condition. In this case the confidence level for the evidence part of that assessment was recorded as not applicable (N/A).

Even where a value was given for ‘level of agreement’, if the overall assessment of the component was unknown, the overall component confidence level was also recorded as not applicable (N/A).

**Use of ‘Unfavourable’:** Where any one component was unfavourable, the overall conclusion was unfavourable, (the ‘one out, all out’ rule), unless there was a good reason to deviate from this. See, for example, the otter assessments.

There were two types of confidence considered during the indicative condition assessment process.

1. The level of consensus between assessors and
2. The confidence in the evidence that the assessment was based on.

A matrix approach was used for this first stage of assigning confidence levels for each component of the indicative assessment.

**Figure B1:** Matrix used to assign the confidence level for each component of the indicative condition assessment.

Level of agreement ↑	High	<b>Low</b>	<b>Medium</b>	<b>High</b>
	Medium	<b>Low</b>	<b>Medium</b>	<b>Medium</b>
	Low	<b>Low</b>	<b>Low</b>	<b>Low</b>
		Low	Medium	High
	→ Confidence in evidence			

### **B.1.1 Level of agreement between assessors**

Assessors were required to draw conclusions based on the available evidence in the context of their knowledge of the relevant feature at that site. Where available evidence was contradictory or of only partial benefit in arriving at a condition assessment, this was resolved as far as possible, taking into account the amount, quality and relevance of the data. The resultant conclusion was given a confidence rating for the degree of consensus amongst the assessors, as follows:

- **High:** All assessors agreed with the assessment of the feature condition component;
- **Medium:** The majority of the assessors agreed with the assessment of the feature condition component;
- **Low:** There was no clear consensus on the assessment of the feature condition component.

### **B.1.2 Level of confidence in the evidence used to make the assessment**

The degree of confidence in the assessments of each component was based on the quantity, quality, relevance or consistency of the evidence used. The categories are high, medium and low confidence as described below:

#### **High confidence**

- Clear evidence from complete monitoring surveys (high quality data collected to relevant standards with robust analysis of results and appropriate positional data) to support assessment relevant to condition components.

#### **Medium confidence**

- Partial survey or one of lower quality (i.e. lacking detail or appropriate positional data);
- Indirectly relevant to condition components but evidence may be from a complete survey, scientifically accurate study, peer-reviewed research or other surveys;
- Site-based, expert knowledge directly relevant to targets, supported by evidence (i.e. records, casework history, photos, positional data).

#### **Low confidence**

- Incomplete, old or lower quality survey;
- High quality data but from only a small portion of the component (e.g. data only available for one small area of a habitat on a site where that habitat is extensive and varied);
- Modelled information;
- Site-based, expert knowledge information either indirectly relevant to component condition or lacking sufficient supporting information.

## **B.2 Assigning confidence levels to the overall indicative condition assessment**

The process for assigning the overall confidence level for the indicative assessment of the feature from the component confidence levels used the following rules:

- Where the overall indicative condition assessment was Unknown the confidence level was stated as not applicable.
- Where only one of the assessment components was unfavourable (leading to the overall assessment of unfavourable), the confidence level associated with the unfavourable component was used.
- Where two or more of the assessment components were unfavourable (leading to the overall assessment of unfavourable), the highest confidence level assigned to one of the unfavourable components was used for the overall confidence level.
- In all other circumstances the highest confidence level<sup>8</sup> attained for one of the individual components was used.

## **B.3 Use of confidence ratings**

In all instances, whenever the indicative features and site condition assessments are reproduced or quoted this should be done together with the confidence rating and the definition of indicative assessment provided in this report.

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<sup>8</sup> The use of the highest confidence level is one used in WFD assessments – reflecting that the assessment confidence is based on the best evidence available.



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