

NPWS

**Black Head-Poulsallagh Complex SAC
(site code: 000020)**

**Conservation objectives supporting document -
coastal habitats**

Version 1 - supplement 1

March 2026

IMPORTANT: This supplement, published in 2026, includes details relating to the EU habitat **2130 Fixed coastal dunes with herbaceous vegetation (grey dunes)*** 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, 2014). 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Conservation Objectives (SSCO), or SSCO supporting documents, including the mapping, are to be considered **superseded** by these updates.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

2130 Fixed coastal dunes with herbaceous vegetation (grey dunes)* were added as a Qualifying Interest(s) to Black Head-Poulsallagh Complex SAC (site code: 000020) 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 2130 Fixed coastal dunes with herbaceous vegetation (grey dunes)*

2.1.1 Site description of habitat

Fixed coastal dunes are found at Fanore dunes, located south of Black Head, where they formed over limestone. The bedrock can be seen outcropping in the low-lying areas. As a result, the sand is highly calcareous in nature and the dune vegetation comprises a number of calcicolous (calcium-loving) species. These include Pyramidal Orchid (*Anacamptis pyramidalis*), Thyme-leaved Sandwort (*Arenaria serpyllifolia*), Squinancywort (*Asperula cynanchica*) and Hairy Rock-cress (*Arabis hirsuta*). The parasitic Dodder (*Cuscuta epithymum*) grows in abundance and the profusion of orchid species including Pyramidal Orchid, Fragrant Orchid (*Gymnadenia conopsea*) and a range of *Dactylorhiza* species is noteworthy. Species recorded from the high dunes include Sea-holly (*Eryngium maritimum*), Sea Spurge (*Euphorbia paralias*) and Marram Grass (*Ammophila arenaria*). A small population of the rare liverwort *Petalophyllum ralfsii*, a species is listed on Annex I of the E.U. Habitats Directive, occurs within a damp, grassy area of the dunes.

2.1.2. Overall objective

The overall objective for '*Fixed coastal dunes with herbaceous vegetation (grey dunes)**' in Black Head-Poulsallagh Complex SAC (site code: 000020) 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.

2.1.3. 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.

During the Coastal Monitoring Project (CMP) (Ryle *et al.*, 2007), area was calculated at 61.87ha, although this was a slight over-estimate as some man-made structures present at the time were not excluded from the habitat maps.

During the Sand Dune Monitoring Project (SDM) (Delaney, *et al.*, 2013), anthropogenic loss 0.015ha of *2130 Fixed dune habitat was noted. In the most recent survey (NPWS internal files), losses totalling 2.02ha were recorded due to human activities. Natural erosion at the western dune face was also recorded. The total area reported was 53.52ha.

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

2.1.4. Range

Habitat distribution

No change in the distribution of the habitat in the site has been observed since designation.

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

2.1.5 Structure and Functions

Structure and Functions for Fixed coastal dunes with herbaceous vegetation (grey dunes)* are assessed on the basis of:

Physical structure: functionality and sediment supply

Target: Natural circulation of sediment and organic matter, absence of physical obstructions or evidence of sediment extraction from the beach and its environs. Physical obstructions that have been in place and are unchanged since prior to 1994 are excluded from this target, unless they have a current adverse impact on sediment circulation.

Disturbance

Target: No more than 20% of the habitat should be subject to disturbance e.g. trampling, vehicle damage, removal of substrate.

Bare sand

Target: Bare sand is present but does not exceed 10% of fixed dune habitat, subject to natural processes.

Vegetation structure: sward height

Target: Sward height is varied across the habitat. Between 30 and 70% of stops have an average height between 2-10cm. The remaining stops have taller sward, except for tracks, disturbed ground and by bare sand areas.

Flowering and fruiting of any positive indicator species

Target: Present in 40% or more of stops.

Vegetation composition: typical species (positive indicators)

Target: At least eight of the positive species occur with a frequency of more than 20% of stops and every stop contains at least four positive indicator species.

Vegetation composition: native negative indicator species

Target: No negative indicator species occurs at a frequency of more than 60% of stops and the total combined cover of all negative indicator species across the habitat is 5% or less and highest % cover of any negative indicator species within any stop is 25% or less.

Vegetation composition: non-native species

Target: No non-native species occurs at a frequency of more than 20% of stops and no evidence that % cover is increasing.

Vegetation composition: scrub/trees other than Juniper (*Juniperus communis*)

Target: Trees and scrub do not occur at a frequency of more than 60% of stops and combined cover across the habitat is 5%.

Vegetation composition: trees/saplings from adjacent plantations

Target: Present in or close to (*i.e.* within 20m) no more than 20% of stops.

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

Target: No evidence of decline since designation.

Further detail on the assessment protocol for sand dune habitats can be found in Delaney *et al.* (2013).

According to the most recent site survey (NPWS internal files), the structure and functions are impaired due to excessive cover of bare sand and damage due to disturbance. These issues were associated with expansion of the caravan park, recreation activities, and rabbits.

All of the other criteria passed. Sheep and rabbit grazing contribute to maintaining a varied sward height, with taller sward around the caravan park. Bracken and non-native species are present but not excessive.

3. References

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Appendix 1 – Distribution map of Fixed coastal dunes with herbaceous vegetation (grey dunes)* in Black Head-Poulsallagh Complex SAC (000020)

