

**Comeragh Mountains SAC (site code 001952)**  
**Conservation objectives supporting document**  
**- upland habitats**

**NPWS**

**Version 1**

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**Please note that this document should be read in conjunction with the following report: NPWS (2021) Conservation Objectives: Comeragh Mountains SAC 001952. Version 1.0. National Parks and Wildlife Service, Department of Housing, Local Government and Heritage, Ireland.**

## 1 Introduction

Achieving Favourable Conservation Status (FCS) is the overall objective to be reached for all Annex I habitat types and Annex II species of European Community interest listed in the EU Habitats Directive 92/43/EEC. It is defined in positive terms, such that a habitat type or species must be prospering and have good prospects of continuing to do so.

Almost 19% of Ireland can be considered to support upland habitats (Perrin *et al.*, 2009). The importance of these areas for biodiversity conservation is unquestionable, with numerous upland habitat types listed under Annex I of the EU Habitats Directive and many rare and threatened bird and other animal species being associated with these habitats. This is reflected in the fact that over 40% of the total terrestrial area currently selected for designation as Special Areas of Conservation (SAC) in Ireland lies above 150m in altitude.

The Scoping Study and Pilot Survey of Upland Habitats (Perrin *et al.*, 2009) was commissioned by the National Parks and Wildlife Service (NPWS) with the primary remit of devising an appropriate strategy and methodologies for conducting a National Survey of Upland Habitats (NSUH). Four phases of the NSUH have subsequently been conducted between 2010 and 2014. The principle aims of the NSUH are to map all habitats within a site and to assess the conservation condition of the relevant Annex I habitats, listed in Table 1.

Comeragh Mountains SAC was surveyed as part of the NSUH between late March and mid-May 2010. The results of the survey are reported in Roche *et al.* (2014).

**Table 1:** Annex I habitats that occur in Irish uplands and which are primary focus habitats for the NSUH. Habitats in bold are those that are listed as Qualifying Interests for Comeragh Mountains SAC

Habitat code	Habitat name
<b>4010</b>	<b>Northern Atlantic wet heaths with <i>Erica tetralix</i></b>
<b>4030</b>	<b>European dry heaths</b>
<b>4060</b>	<b>Alpine and Boreal heaths</b>
6230	Species-rich <i>Nardus</i> grasslands, on siliceous substrates in mountain areas (and submountain areas, in Continental Europe)*
<b>7130</b>	<b>Blanket bogs (* if active bog)</b>
7140	Transition mires and quaking bogs
7150	Depressions on peat substrates of the Rhynchosporion
7230	Alkaline fens
<b>8110</b>	<b>Siliceous screes of the montane to snow levels (<i>Androsacetalia alpinae</i> and <i>Galeopsietalia ladani</i>)</b>
8120	Calcareous and calcshist screes of the montane to alpine levels ( <i>Thlaspietea rotundifolii</i> )
<b>8210</b>	<b>Calcareous rocky slopes with chasmophytic vegetation</b>
<b>8220</b>	<b>Siliceous rocky slopes with chasmophytic vegetation</b>

\* Denotes a priority habitat under the EU Habitats Directive

## 1.1 Comeragh Mountains SAC

Comeragh Mountains SAC is a medium sized upland SAC, being 62.9km<sup>2</sup> in extent and is located in Co. Waterford between the towns of Clonmel in the north and Dungarvan in the south (O.S. Discovery Series map 75). The central feature is a high plateau of Old Red Sandstone that rises to a maximum height of 792m, although the most obvious summit is that of Knockaunapeebra (alt. 726m) with its twin cairns. The plateau is skirted by several deep corries in many of which are to be found high altitude lakes, namely Coumshingaun Lough, Lough Coumfea, Coumalocha, the Sgilloge Loughs, Coumtay, the Coum Iarthar Loughs and Crotty's Lough. On the south-eastern side of the SAC is the valley of Coummahon where the River Mahon spills down from the high plateau at Mahon Falls. To the south-west of the plateau are the peaks of Seefin (alt. 726m) and Farbreaga (alt. 617m), connected by a narrow ridge; this area is sometimes referred to as the Monavullagh Mountains. In the north of the SAC is the broad valley of The Gap that separates the central plateau from the ridge of Knockanaffrin where Coumduala Lough is to be found. The actual peak of Knockanaffrin (alt. 755m) lies just outside the SAC and several other peaks in the mountain range are not included in the SAC.

## 1.2 NSUH mapping methodology

A detailed habitat mapping survey of Comeragh Mountains SAC utilising the NSUH methodology presented in Perrin *et al.* (2014) has been conducted. A brief description of the methodology used to map habitats by the NSUH is presented here to elucidate how area was calculated for each of the habitats and to explain how the graduated distribution maps were produced. For full details, see Perrin *et al.* (2014).

The local topography of most upland areas consists of intricate patterns of hollows, rocky outcrops, flushes and terraces. The mosaics of vegetation that have developed on this varying topography is often far too complex to map as individual habitats in the manner possible for more uniform landscapes. Hence, the approach adopted by the NSUH was to map units (referred to as polygons) that reflect homogeneous mosaics of vegetation and topography. Attempting to map smaller polygons representing single habitats would have greatly increased the amount of time spent mapping and the number of polygons mapped, and would not ultimately have eliminated the need for recording mosaics at smaller scales. All the habitats and non-vegetated substrates present in each polygon and the approximate percentage of the polygon they occupy were recorded. As the total area of each polygon is known from digitisation, data on the approximate extent of each habitat can be readily calculated. A provisional vegetation classification of upland vegetation types was developed to allow more detailed recording of plant communities than would be possible using a habitat classification scheme such as Fossitt (2000).

It is important to note that the NSUH classified and assessed habitats according to the flora and vegetation communities currently present rather than that which may previously have occurred. For example, on an area of drained deep wet blanket peat the current plant communities may be more akin to wet heath than blanket bog as species sensitive to desiccation may have disappeared after drainage. Such an area would therefore have been mapped as wet heath (current vegetation) rather than drained blanket bog. As a result of this approach, the only vegetation classified and mapped as the inactive component of 7130 Blanket bogs (\* if active bog) was *Eriophorum angustifolium* – *Sphagnum fallax* swards on eroded bog where a reasonable depth of peat remains. Where areas of

wet heath have developed on drained blanket bog they may retain blanket bog restoration potential and this may need to be assessed as, even though restoration of wet heath is an objective for this SAC, so is restoration of active blanket bog; however, the latter being a priority Annex I habitat is likely to take precedence (see also 1.3). The Fossitt (2000) habitat PB4 Bare peat was used for recently cutover areas of peat. Where older cutover areas had revegetated to another vegetation community, or supported a non-vegetation cover type, they were recorded under the relevant community.

Note that the NSUH used the most up-to-date SAC boundary dataset available at the time of survey. For Comeragh Mountains SAC, this was the boundary available in September 2010, which was based on the Ordnance Survey six-inch map base. Any areas calculated and presented here are based on this boundary version.

### **1.3 Potential for habitat restoration**

There are substantial areas of non-Annex I upland grassland within Comeragh Mountains SAC (Roche *et al.*, 2014). This vegetation is particularly abundant on the north-west facing slopes of Coumfea and on the western facing slopes at Coumaraglin Mountain, both in the west of the SAC. The majority of the grassland has probably been formed by long-term degradation of 4010 Wet heaths due to overgrazing and/or burning. Therefore, within this expanse there are potential areas for restoration to 4010 Wet heaths. The remaining area of grassland is likely to have originated from 4030 Dry heaths.

Restoration management for 7130 Blanket bogs (\* if active bog) in this SAC is required, as the conservation objective for the habitat is to restore favourable conservation condition here. Areas that might be restored to the priority habitat active blanket bog could include inactive bog, bare eroding bog and recent cutover bog, and also areas of drained deep peat or older cutovers which currently support other types of vegetation such as heath. These latter areas may currently thus be classified as other Annex I habitats (e.g. 4010, 4030). Restoration of priority 7130 habitat may therefore result in loss in the area and distribution of other Annex I habitats that are Qualifying Interests. If such scenarios are identified by restoration management plans, the conservation objectives for these other Qualifying Interests should be amended accordingly.

## **2 Conservation objectives**

A site-specific conservation objective aims to define the favourable conservation condition of a habitat or species at site level. The maintenance of habitats and species within sites at favourable condition will contribute to the maintenance of favourable conservation status (FCS) of those habitats and species at a national level.

Conservation objectives are defined using attributes and targets based on the parameters set out in the Habitats Directive for defining favourable status, namely area, range, and structure and functions.

The *Guidelines for a national survey and conservation assessment of upland vegetation and habitats in Ireland* (Perrin *et al.*, 2014) have been used as a basis for setting most of the site-specific attributes and targets for uplands habitats. However, attributes and targets may change/become more refined as further information becomes available.

Objectives for habitats have been set with reference to the assessment of those habitats in Roche *et al.*, (2014). If area and structure and functions were both assessed as “Favourable” the objective for that habitat is to maintain favourable conservation condition. If either parameter was assessed as “Unfavourable – Inadequate” or “Unfavourable – Bad”, the objective for that habitat is to restore favourable conservation condition.

This document provides supporting information for the attributes of the conservation objectives for the upland habitats within Comeragh Mountains SAC, given in the main conservation objectives document for the SAC. The two documents should be read in conjunction with each other.

The conservation objective for each of the Annex I habitats dealt with in this supporting document are as follows:

- To restore the favourable conservation condition of Northern Atlantic wet heaths with *Erica tetralix* in Comeragh Mountains SAC.
- To restore the favourable conservation condition of European dry heaths in Comeragh Mountains SAC.
- To restore the favourable conservation condition of Alpine and Boreal heaths in Comeragh Mountains SAC.
- To restore the favourable conservation condition of Blanket bogs (\* if active bog) in Comeragh Mountains SAC.
- To restore the favourable conservation condition of Siliceous screes of the montane to snow levels (*Androsacetalia alpinae* and *Galeopsietalia ladani*) in Comeragh Mountains SAC.
- To restore the favourable conservation condition of Calcareous rocky slopes with chasmophytic vegetation in Comeragh Mountains SAC.
- To restore the favourable conservation condition of Siliceous rocky slopes with chasmophytic vegetation in Comeragh Mountains SAC.

### 3 Area

Habitat extent is a basic attribute to be assessed when determining the condition of a particular habitat. The target is for the habitat area to be stable or increasing from the baseline which was established by Roche *et al.* (2014). These areas are reproduced in Table 2.

**Table 2:** Mapped extent of the upland Annex I habitats that are listed as Qualifying Interests for Comeragh Mountains SAC. \*denotes priority habitat.

Annex I code	Habitat	Area (ha)	% of SAC
4010	Wet heaths	527.9	8.39
4030	Dry heaths	2,094.6	33.28
4060	Alpine and Boreal heaths	32.3	0.51
7130*	Active blanket bogs*	838.0	13.32
7130	Inactive blanket bogs	69.2	1.10
8110	Siliceous screes	44.1	0.70
8210	Calcareous rocky slopes	0.02	0.0003
8220	Siliceous rocky slopes	72.3	1.15

As mentioned earlier, the area of blanket bog habitat comprises active and inactive blanket bogs. The most frequent example of the latter encountered in the NSUH is described in Perrin *et al.* (2014) as a monospecific sward of common cottongrass (*Eriophorum angustifolium*) on eroded bog where a

reasonable depth of peat remains. Note, however, that where examples of this community occur on re-deposited, eroded peat, these areas will not have the structural, hydrological or functional characteristics of naturally formed blanket bog, but colonisation by bog cotton plays a valuable early role in stabilising the peat.

Loss of area since 1995 was investigated as part of the NSUH through a comparison of contemporary and past aerial photographs (Roche *et al.*, 2014). Changes in areas that can be detected through this method are limited to obvious habitat changes such as mechanised turf-cutting, agricultural improvement, afforestation, the development of windfarms, roads or tracks, and large-scale discrete erosion events due to bog bursts or land slips. Where obvious anthropogenic losses have been identified, these are included in the area target.

In the case of 7130 Blanket bogs (\* if active bog), it was not practicable within the NSUH survey to distinguish between habitat loss/deterioration due to chronic erosion that occurred prior to 1995 and that since 1995, or the causes of such erosion. Thus, the habitat area mapped, along with obvious losses, is likely to be an underestimate of the total area of 7130 Blanket bogs (\* if active bog) present in 1995. See also the peat formation attribute under structure and functions.

#### **4 Range**

Each habitat's range at site level, in the form of habitat distribution, has been recorded through the mapping carried out through the NSUH and these are reproduced (see maps 1–7). The target is that there should be no decline from the current distribution.

#### **5 Structure and functions**

Structure and functions relates to the physical components of a habitat ("structure") and the ecological processes that drive it ("functions"). For upland habitats, these include a range of aspects such as soil chemistry, vegetation composition, hydrological regime, community diversity, habitat quality, species occurrence, indicators of local distinctiveness, erosion, disturbed ground, evidence of burning and negative species occurrence. These structure and functions are expanded on in the sections below.

At Comeragh Mountains SAC, the structure and functions of 4010 Wet heaths were assessed as Unfavourable – Bad. Reasons for failure included inadequate cover of desirable species including cross-leaved heath (*Erica tetralix*), ericoid species and mosses and lichens. Inappropriate burning was recorded, including burning in sensitive areas.

The structure and functions of 4030 Dry heaths were assessed as Unfavourable – Bad in the SAC. The vegetation composition and physical structure were good, but the vegetation structure was poor with excessive grazing, burning in sensitive areas and poor structure of ling (*Calluna vulgaris*).

The structure and functions of 4060 Alpine and Boreal heaths were also assessed as Unfavourable – Bad. The main reason for failure was excessive cover of negative indicator species. Inadequate cover of positive indicator species and excessive grazing were also recorded. Physical structure was good, with no failures being recorded under the criteria relating to disturbed bare ground.



The structure and functions of 7130 Blanket bogs (\* if active bog) were assessed as Unfavourable – Bad with the main reason for failure being inadequate cover of bryophyte or lichen species. Other reasons for failure included inadequate numbers of positive indicator species and excessive cover of ling (*Calluna vulgaris*). Burning and erosion were also significant issues.

The structure and functions of 8110 Siliceous screes were assessed as Unfavourable – Bad. Inadequate cover of bryophytes and lichens, excessive cover of the non-native moss species *Campylopus introflexus* and an inadequate number of positive indicator species were reasons for failure. The vegetation structure and physical structure were good with no failures in the relevant criteria.

The structure and functions of 8210 Calcareous rocky slopes were assessed as Unfavourable – Bad with an inadequate number of indicative fern or saxifrage species (*Saxifraga* spp.) and an inadequate number of positive indicator species recorded.

8220 Siliceous rocky slopes were assessed as Unfavourable – Bad with an inadequate number of positive indicator species and excessive cover of the non-native New Zealand willowherb (*Epilobium brunnescens*) recorded.

## **5.1 Ecosystem function**

Ecosystem function is assessed primarily through consideration of soil nutrient levels. For 7130 Blanket bogs (\* if active bog), additional consideration is given to peat formation and hydrology.

### **5.1.1 Ecosystem function: soil nutrients**

An attribute to assess the soil nutrients is common to each of the upland habitats with a view to maintaining the soil nutrient status within the natural range suited to the habitat. Relevant nutrients and natural ranges have yet to be defined. Nitrogen deposition and associated acidification are noted as being relevant to all upland habitats in NPWS (2013). The target for each habitat is to maintain the soil pH and nutrient status within the natural ranges.

### **5.1.2 Ecosystem function: peat formation**

Ecosystem function of 7130 Blanket bogs (\* if active bog) is further assessed through peat formation. Perrin *et al.* (2014) established an overriding assessment of blanket bog structure and functions based on the proportion of degraded bog within a site which includes eroding bog and cutover bog which would previously have been this Annex I habitat. If more than 1% of the combined area of active bog (Annex I habitat 7130\*), inactive bog (Annex I habitat 7130), eroded bog (habitat category PB5 – Fossitt, 2000) and recently cutover bog (habitat PB4 – Fossitt, 2000) is inactive, eroded or cutover then it should be assessed as Unfavourable – Inadequate, even if the results of the monitoring stops are more positive. If more than 5% of the combined area is inactive, eroded or cutover it is assessed as Unfavourable – Bad.

The EU habitats interpretation manual (European Commission, 2013) defines active blanket bog as “still supporting a significant area of vegetation that is normally peat-forming”. For the purposes of defining favourable conservation condition of the Annex I habitat, the target is that at least 99% of the total Annex I blanket bog area is active bog.

### 5.1.3 Ecosystem function: hydrology

Ecosystem function of 7130 Blanket bogs (\* if active bog) is further assessed through assessment of hydrology. Drains (cut for purposes of peat cutting, afforestation, etc.) and erosion gullies impact on the hydrology of blanket bog in the local vicinity. The target is for the natural hydrology to be unaffected by drains and erosion gullies. The process of restoring hydrological integrity of blanket bog may impact areas of heath habitats, e.g. where the latter may have colonised drained blanket bogs, as discussed in Section 1.3.

## 5.2 Community diversity

Roche *et al.* (2014) recorded habitat information based on a provisional list of vegetation communities which is detailed in the NSUH manual (Perrin *et al.*, 2014). Data is presented in the following tables on the abundance of the various communities that comprise upland Qualifying Interest habitats at Comeragh Mountains SAC together with the area of each of these communities and the percentage of the SAC that these communities cover (hepatic mats associated with Qualifying Interests are considered under the indicators of local distinctiveness attribute). The rocky Annex I habitats (8110, 8210 and 8220) are each defined by just one provisional vegetation community; therefore, the community diversity attribute is not applied to these habitats.

The target is to maintain the variety of vegetation communities subject to natural processes.

### 5.2.1 Community diversity data for 4010 Wet heaths

NSUH code	NSUH community	Area (ha)	% of SAC
WH2	<i>Trichophorum germanicum</i> – <i>Cladonia</i> spp. – <i>Racomitrium lanuginosum</i> wet heath	6.0	0.10
WH3	<i>Calluna vulgaris</i> – <i>Molinia caerulea</i> – <i>Sphagnum capillifolium</i> wet/damp heath	104.2	1.66
WH4a	<i>Trichophorum germanicum</i> – <i>Eriophorum angustifolium</i> wet heath – typical sub-community	162.7	2.59
WH4b	<i>Trichophorum germanicum</i> – <i>Eriophorum angustifolium</i> wet heath – <i>Calluna vulgaris</i> sub-community	159.8	2.54
WH4c	<i>Trichophorum germanicum</i> – <i>Eriophorum angustifolium</i> wet heath – <i>Juncus squarrosus</i> sub-community	91.1	1.45
WH5	<i>Trichophorum germanicum</i> – <i>Nardus stricta</i> – <i>Racomitrium lanuginosum</i> montane wet heath	4.1	0.07

### 5.2.2 Community diversity data for 4030 Dry heaths

NSUH code	NSUH community	Area (ha)	% of SAC
DH1	<i>Ulex gallii</i> - <i>Erica cinerea</i> dry heath	9.9	0.16
DH3	<i>Calluna vulgaris</i> – <i>Erica cinerea</i> dry heath	1,676.1	26.63
DH4	<i>Calluna vulgaris</i> – <i>Sphagnum capillifolium</i> dry/damp heath	28.5	0.45
DH6	<i>Calluna vulgaris</i> – <i>Vaccinium myrtillus</i> dry heath	377.8	6.00

### 5.2.3 Community diversity data for 4060 Alpine and Boreal heaths

NSUH code	NSUH community	Area (ha)	% of SAC
MH1a	<i>Calluna vulgaris</i> – <i>Racomitrium lanuginosum</i> montane heath – typical sub-community	14.1	0.23
MH1b	<i>Calluna vulgaris</i> – <i>Racomitrium lanuginosum</i> montane heath – <i>Juncus squarrosus</i> sub-community	13.4	0.21
MH3	<i>Vaccinium myrtillus</i> – <i>Rhytidiadelphus loreus</i> – <i>Anthoxanthum odoratum</i> montane heath	4.8	0.08

### 5.2.4 Community diversity data for 7130 Blanket bogs\*

Only active bog communities are shown.

NSUH code	NSUH community	Area (ha)	% of SAC
BB3	<i>Eriophorum vaginatum</i> – <i>Sphagnum papillosum</i> bog	7.3	0.12
BB4	<i>Trichophorum germanicum</i> – <i>Eriophorum angustifolium</i> bog	90.8	1.44
BB5a	<i>Calluna vulgaris</i> – <i>Eriophorum</i> spp. bog – typical sub-community	643.7	10.23
BB5b	<i>Calluna vulgaris</i> – <i>Eriophorum</i> spp. bog – <i>Juncus squarrosus</i> sub-community	90.8	1.44
BB6a	<i>Eriophorum angustifolium</i> – <i>Juncus squarrosus</i> bog – typical sub-community	1.5	0.02
HW1i	<i>Sphagnum denticulatum/cuspidatum</i> hollow – upland variant	4.0	0.06

## 5.3 Vegetation composition

Vegetation composition is assessed through a range of attributes tailored to each of the habitats. In general terms, they establish minimum thresholds for the occurrence or cover of desirable species and maximum thresholds for undesirable species.

### 5.3.1 Vegetation composition: positive indicator species

The attribute for positive indicator species is common to each of the upland Annex I habitats, and habitat-specific lists of the positive indicator species are presented in the NSUH manual (Perrin *et al.*, 2014). A positive species criterion is set to ensure that vegetation remains representative of the habitat and is not degrading or succeeding to a different habitat. The target by which this attribute is measured varies between habitats. Descriptions of these habitats can be found in the NSUH manual (Perrin *et al.*, 2014).

For some habitats, a certain number of positive indicator species is required. At least seven positive indicator species are required at each monitoring stop for 7130 Blanket bogs (\* if active bog). For 8220 Siliceous rocky slopes, at least one positive indicator to be present within the vicinity of each monitoring stop. For 8110 Siliceous screes the positive indicator attribute is only applied to block scree; examples of shaley, small structure scree are not assessed under this attribute. At least one positive indicator species is required. The positive indicator list is the same as for 8220 Siliceous rocky slopes. For 8210 Calcareous rocky slopes, at least three positive indicator species should occur in the

vicinity of each monitoring stop and at least one fern or *Saxifraga* species from the positive indicator list is required.

For some other habitats, a percentage threshold is set. At least 50% cover of positive indicators is required for 4010 Wet heaths and at least 66% cover for 4060 Alpine and Boreal heaths.

4030 Dry heaths are assessed through the number of positive indicator species present and through the percentage cover of these. The positive indicator list is composed of dwarf shrub species. Only two species are required to meet the number of positive indicator species target as dry heaths are not necessarily rich in these species. However, vegetation supporting and possibly dominated by only one dwarf shrub species is not desirable. Low cover of dwarf shrubs would indicate that the habitat is transitional, usually to grassland. A maximum cover of dwarf shrubs is applied for calcareous heath, which was not recorded at Comeragh Mountains SAC (Roche *et al.*, 2014), due to the characteristically greater forb (broad-leaved herb) component.

### **5.3.2 Vegetation composition: other desirable species**

Other elements of vegetation composition which can collectively be regarded as being desirable are also established with a range of habitat-specific targets set.

#### **Lichens and bryophytes**

Minimum thresholds for cover of lichens and bryophytes are set for habitats where a plentiful lichen/moss layer is characteristic, such as 4010 Wet heaths and 7130 Blanket bogs (\* if active bog), and for 4030 Dry heaths, 4060 Alpine and Boreal heaths and 8110 Siliceous screes. The latter habitats are not necessarily rich in lichen and bryophyte species, but a minimum amount should still be present. Within the habitat-specific targets for these attributes the specific species, or groups of species which are required, are listed together with any exclusions (e.g. *Sphagnum fallax* can be indicative of degraded bog so is excluded from the 7130 Blanket bogs (\* if active bog) assessment and *Campylopus* and *Polytrichum* mosses are excluded from the 4030 Dry heaths assessment as they can be indicative of disturbed conditions).

#### **Dwarf shrub cover**

A minimum threshold cover for dwarf shrubs is set for 4060 Alpine and Boreal heaths. A relatively low threshold of at least 10% is set as loose rock and *Racomitrium lanuginosum* are characteristic elements and often abundant. A lower cover of dwarf shrubs could indicate that the habitat is transitional to grassland or other montane vegetation. Note that minimum dwarf shrub cover within 4030 Dry heaths is addressed by the positive indicator species attribute.

#### **Cross-leaved heath**

Cross-leaved heath (*Erica tetralix*) is specifically mentioned in the formal title of habitat 4010 Wet heaths and is the only characteristic species listed in European Commission (2013). Whilst it is seldom abundant in wet heaths, its presence at high frequencies is considered one of the few characteristics common between the varied communities of this habitat (JNCC, 2009). The target is for the presence of cross-leaved heath within a 20m radius of each monitoring stop.

### **Ericoid species and crowberry**

A dwarf shrub layer with ericoid species is characteristic of 4010 Wet heaths; crowberry (*Empetrum nigrum*) is only rarely present. Low cover of these species would be indicative of chronic overgrazing, burning, etc. The target is for at least 15% cover of these species at each monitoring stop.

### **5.3.3 Vegetation composition: negative indicator species**

A percentage cover threshold for negative indicator species has been established for all upland habitats listed as Qualifying Interests for Comeragh Mountains SAC, except 8210 and 8220. Habitat-specific negative indicator species lists have been established for each of the habitats (Perrin *et al.*, 2014). Presence of these species would likely indicate undesirable impacts of management such as overgrazing, undergrazing, nutrient enrichment, agricultural improvement or impacts on hydrology. The percentage threshold is generally set quite low such that impacts can be reversed before they become more severe.

### **5.3.4 Vegetation composition: non-native species**

An attribute for non-native species is common to each of the upland Annex I habitats. Non-native species can be invasive and have deleterious effects on native vegetation. The target for each habitat is for the total cover of non-native species to be less than 1%. A low target is set as non-native species can spread rapidly and are most easily dealt with when still at lower abundances.

### **5.3.5 Vegetation composition: undesirable native species**

For many of the habitats, maximum percentage cover thresholds for undesirable native species are also set. These are detailed below.

### **Bracken, native trees and shrubs**

The cover of bracken (*Pteridium aquilinum*) and native trees and shrubs is assessed for 4010 Wet heaths, 4030 Dry heaths and the rocky habitats (8110, 8210 and 8220). Tree and shrub cover is assessed for 7130 Blanket bogs (\* if active bog). High cover of bracken would indicate that the habitat may be succeeding towards a dense bracken community and high cover of native trees and shrubs would indicate that the habitat may be succeeding towards scrub or woodland due to lack of grazing or, for bog habitats, due to the habitat drying out. For chasmophytic rocky habitats (8210 and 8220), high cover of these species indicate that rocky slopes are becoming more vegetated which would impact on the niches of the chasmophytic species.

### **Grass and dwarf shrubs**

For 8110 Siliceous screes a high cover of grasses or dwarf shrubs would indicate that the scree is becoming less exposed and succeeding to another habitat. The target is for the total cover of grass species and dwarf shrubs to be less than 20%.

### **Soft rush**

High cover of soft rush (*Juncus effusus*) in 4010 Wet heaths or 4030 Dry heaths would suggest undesirable hydrological conditions. Note, however, that poor flushes dominated by soft rush often

naturally occur in mosaic with these habitats. Discrete areas of this separate habitat should not be considered here. The target is for the cover of soft rush to be less than 10%.

### **Potential dominant species**

For 7130 Blanket bogs (\* if active bog), a maximum threshold is given for bog species which could potentially dominate the habitat, reflecting a reduction in diversity. The selected species are ling (*Calluna vulgaris*), many-stalked spike-rush (*Eleocharis multicaulis*), hare's-tail cottongrass (*Eriophorum vaginatum*), purple moor-grass (*Molinia caerulea*), black bog-rush (*Schoenus nigricans*) and deergrass (*Trichoporum germanicum*). The target is for cover of each of the potential dominant species to be less than 75%.

### **Dwarf shrub cover**

A dwarf shrub layer is characteristic of 4010 Wet heaths, but the vegetation should be a mixture of dwarf shrub and graminoid species with higher cover of dwarf shrubs being potentially indicative of drainage. A maximum target of 75% is therefore set.

Similarly, the calcareous version of 4030 Dry heaths, which was not recorded at Comeragh Mountains SAC (Roche *et al.*, 2014), characteristically has a greater component of broad-leaved herbs than siliceous dry heath. A maximum target of 75% is therefore set.

### **Dwarf shrub composition**

The dwarf shrub layer within 4030 Dry heaths should not be composed primarily of bog-myrtle (*Myrica gale*), creeping willow (*Salix repens*) and western gorse (*Ulex gallii*). Bog-myrtle is indicative of flushed conditions and is more characteristic of wet heaths and blanket bogs. Creeping willow is more characteristic of dune heaths. Western gorse is a component of dry heaths in some regions, but high proportions of it may indicate a history of undesirable levels of grazing. The target for 4030 Dry heaths is for the proportion of dwarf shrub composed of these species to be collectively less than 50%.

## **5.4 Vegetation structure**

Vegetation structure is assessed through a number of attributes tailored to each of the habitats. These measures assess levels of grazing and browsing, burning, *Sphagnum* condition and, for 4030 Dry heaths, growth phases of ling (*Calluna vulgaris*).

### **5.4.1 Browsing and grazing**

Browsing is generally measured through viewing the last complete season's shoots of particular species and assessing the proportion which shows signs of having been browsed. The species which are assessed for browsing are generally the dwarf shrub species: ericoids, crowberry (*Empetrum nigrum*) and bog-myrtle (*Myrica gale*). The target for the heath habitats (4010, 4030 and 4060) and 7130 Blanket bogs (\* if active bog) is for less than 33% of shoots to show signs of grazing. On the rocky habitats (8110, 8210 and 8220) live leaves of forbs and shoots of dwarf shrubs showing signs of grazing or browsing collectively should be less than 50%. An additional assessment of grazing of live leaves of specific graminoids is made for 4060 Alpine and Boreal heaths. The specific graminoids are stiff sedge (*Carex bigelowii*), wavy hair-grass (*Deschampsia flexuosa*), sheep's-fescue (*Festuca ovina*) and viviparous sheep's-fescue (*Festuca vivipara*). The target for 4060 is that less than 10% of the live leaves

of the specific graminoids collectively show signs of grazing. High levels of grazing of these species in 4060 Alpine and Boreal heaths would be undesirable as grazing is not required to maintain this habitat.

#### **5.4.2 Burning**

Occasional fires can be part of the natural cycle of heaths and may, under carefully controlled circumstances, be used as an occasional management tool to promote regeneration of, or diversity of, growth phases in ling (*Calluna vulgaris*). However, currently most hill fires in Ireland are intentionally started to encourage grass growth for livestock. Fires that are too intense, too frequent, too extensive or which occur in sensitive areas are damaging to habitats. An assessment of burning is made for the heath habitats (4010, 4030 and 4060) and 7130 Blanket bogs (\* if active bog). Habitat-specific lists of sensitive areas where burning should not occur are presented in Perrin *et al.* (2014). Examples of sensitive areas are: 'areas where soils are thin and less than 5cm deep' and 'pools, wet hollows, hags and erosion gullies, and within 5–10m of the edge of watercourses'.

4010 Wet heaths and 7130 Blanket bogs (\* if active bog) have the same targets relating to there being 'no signs of burning into the moss, liverwort or lichen layer or exposure of peat surface due to burning' and 'no signs of burning in sensitive areas'. The target for 4030 Dry heaths is 'no sign of burning in sensitive areas'. The target for 4060 Alpine and Boreal heaths, which does not require burning for the maintenance of the habitat, is for there to be 'no signs of burning within the habitat'.

#### **5.4.3 Sphagnum condition**

Disturbance to *Sphagnum* is assessed for habitats 4010 Wet heaths and 7130 Blanket bogs (\* if active bog). High levels of disturbed *Sphagnum* would indicate undesirable levels of grazers. For both habitats, the target is for less than 10% of the *Sphagnum* cover to be crushed, broken and/or pulled up.

#### **5.4.4 Growth phases of ling**

The growth phases of ling (*Calluna vulgaris*) are assessed for 4030 Dry heaths. The growth phases are pioneer (<10cm high), building (10-30cm high) and mature (>30cm high). The target is that all growth phases of ling should occur throughout the habitat, outside sensitive areas, with at least 10% of cover in the mature phase. As burning is undesirable within sensitive areas, it is not reasonable to require the stated diversity of growth phases within these areas. The list of sensitive areas is presented in the NSUH manual (Perrin *et al.*, 2014).

#### **5.4.5 Senescent ling**

The cover of senescent ling (*Calluna vulgaris*) in 4030 Dry heaths is also assessed. Senescence is part of the natural cycle of ling but a dominance of ling in the senescent phase would indicate a lack of management (appropriate grazing or burning) to promote ling regeneration. The target is that the cover of senescent ling should be less than 50%.

### **5.5 Physical structure**

The physical structure of upland habitats can be damaged by drainage, walking trails, unsuitable levels of grazing and erosion. Physical structure is assessed through a number of attributes tailored to each

of the habitats. Elements which are assessed for the various habitats comprise disturbed bare ground, drainage and erosion; these are detailed below.

### **5.5.1 Disturbance/Disturbed bare ground**

Disturbance applies to 8110 Siliceous screes and the disturbed bare ground attribute is common to all the other upland habitats listed as Qualifying Interests for Comeragh Mountains SAC, except the chasmophytic rocky habitats (8210 and 8220). Disturbance can include hoof marks, wallows, human footprints, vehicle and machinery tracks and, for 8110 Siliceous screes, scree running. Excessive disturbance can result in loss of characteristic species and presage erosion for heaths and peatlands. Scree is subject to naturally recurrent disturbance, but high levels of disturbance may impact on vegetation cover and diversity.

The target for 8110 Siliceous screes is set at there being less than 10% ground disturbed by human and animal paths, scree running or vehicles. The target for 4010 Wet heaths, 4030 Dry heaths, 4060 Alpine and Boreal heaths and 7130 Blanket bogs (\* if active bog) is set at there being less than 10% disturbed bare ground which, in the case of peatlands, can indicate that such disturbance may be impeding recovery of vegetation on damaged areas.

### **5.5.2 Drainage**

Drainage can result in loss of characteristic species and transition to drier habitats. This attribute is applied to 4010 Wet heaths and 7130 Blanket bogs (\* if active bog). For each habitat, the target is the area showing signs of drainage from heavy trampling, tracking or ditches to be less than 10%.

### **5.5.3 Erosion**

Erosion is assessed for 7130 Blanket bogs (\* if active bog). Erosion leads to loss of peat from the blanket bog system, increases in peat sediment in nearby water courses, loss of blanket bog habitat and drainage. The target is that less than 5% of the greater bog mosaic comprises erosion gullies and eroded areas. The greater bog mosaic incorporates the blanket bog itself and associated vegetation types and non-vegetation cover types that appear to have been derived from former blanket bog, including, but not limited to bare peat, loose rock, gravel and running water.

## **5.6 Indicators of local distinctiveness**

Roche *et al.* (2014) compiled and mapped existing rare and notable plant records for the SAC and added any new records collected during the NSUH survey. Rare species (those considered at least *Near Threatened* on the appropriate Red List) which could be assigned to a particular habitat, should be considered indicators of local distinctiveness for habitats. The target is for no decline in distribution or population sizes of rare, threatened or scarce species associated with the particular habitat.

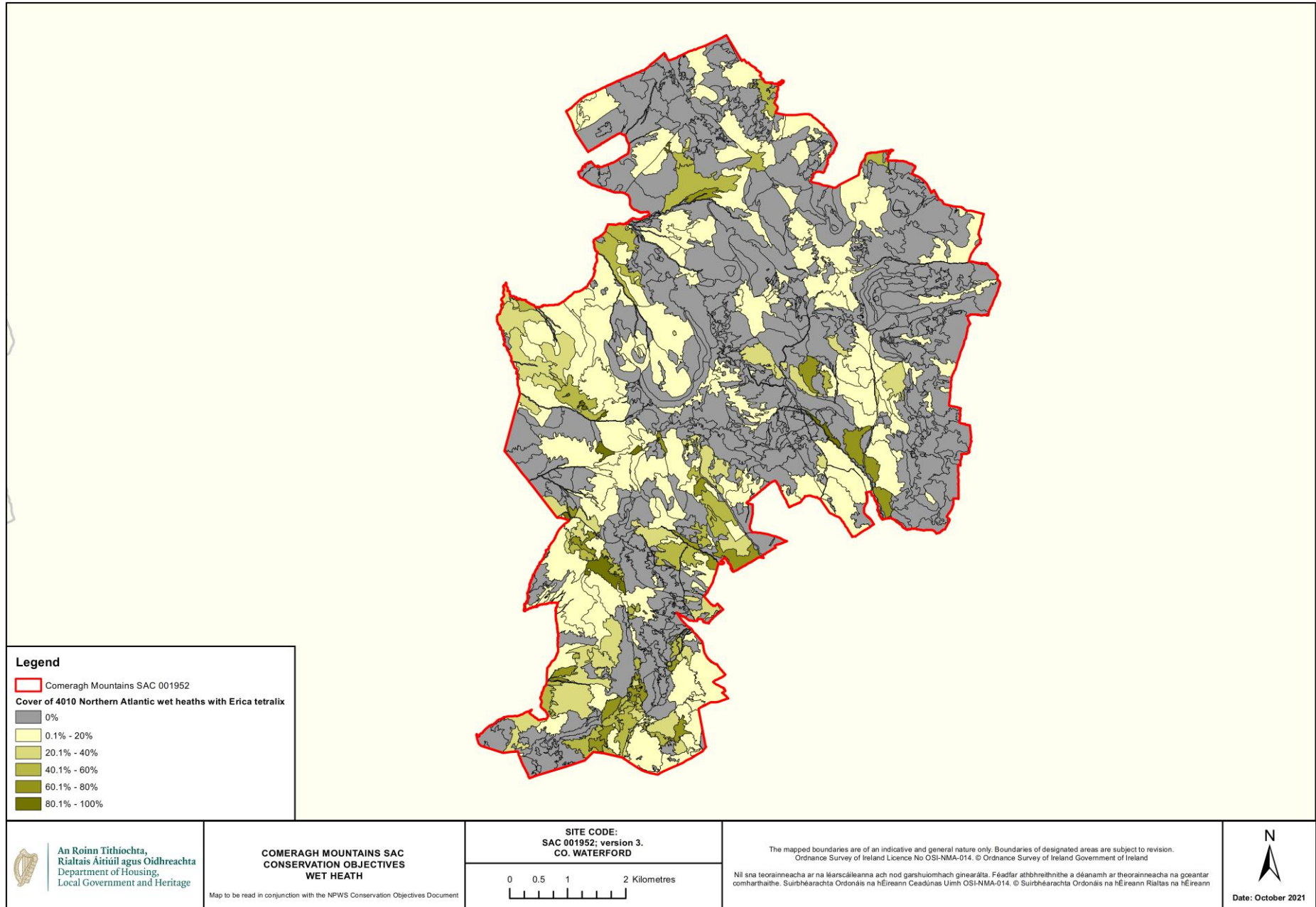
Where hepatic mats of the *Calluna vulgaris-Herbertus aduncus* community have been recorded within a particular habitat by Roche *et al.* (2014), these are also listed as indicators of local distinctiveness. No assessment of the conservation status of this community has been conducted but proposals for such an assessment are presented in Barron & Perrin (2014). The target for these hepatic mats is for no decline in status of hepatic mats associated with the habitat in question.



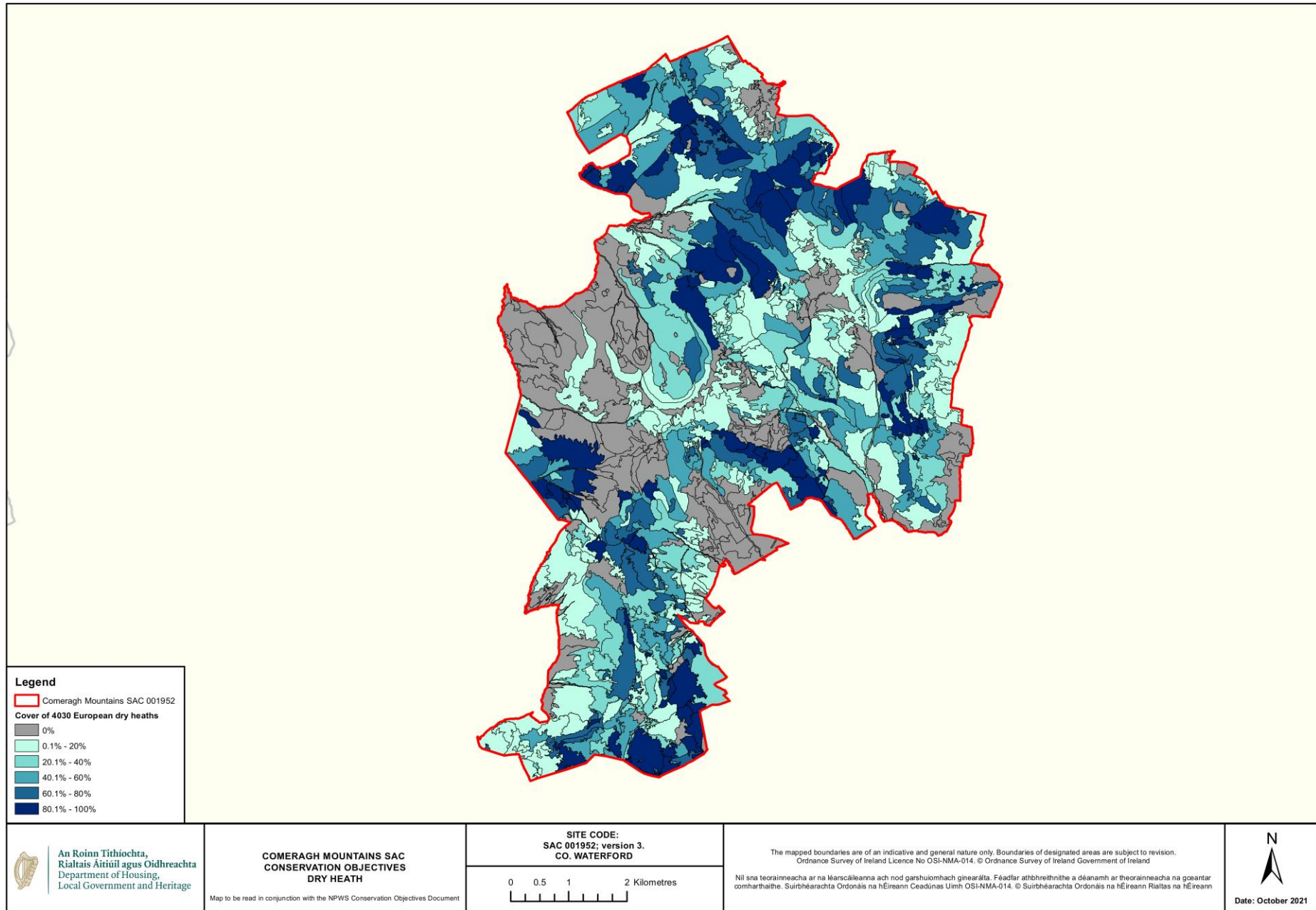
## 6 References

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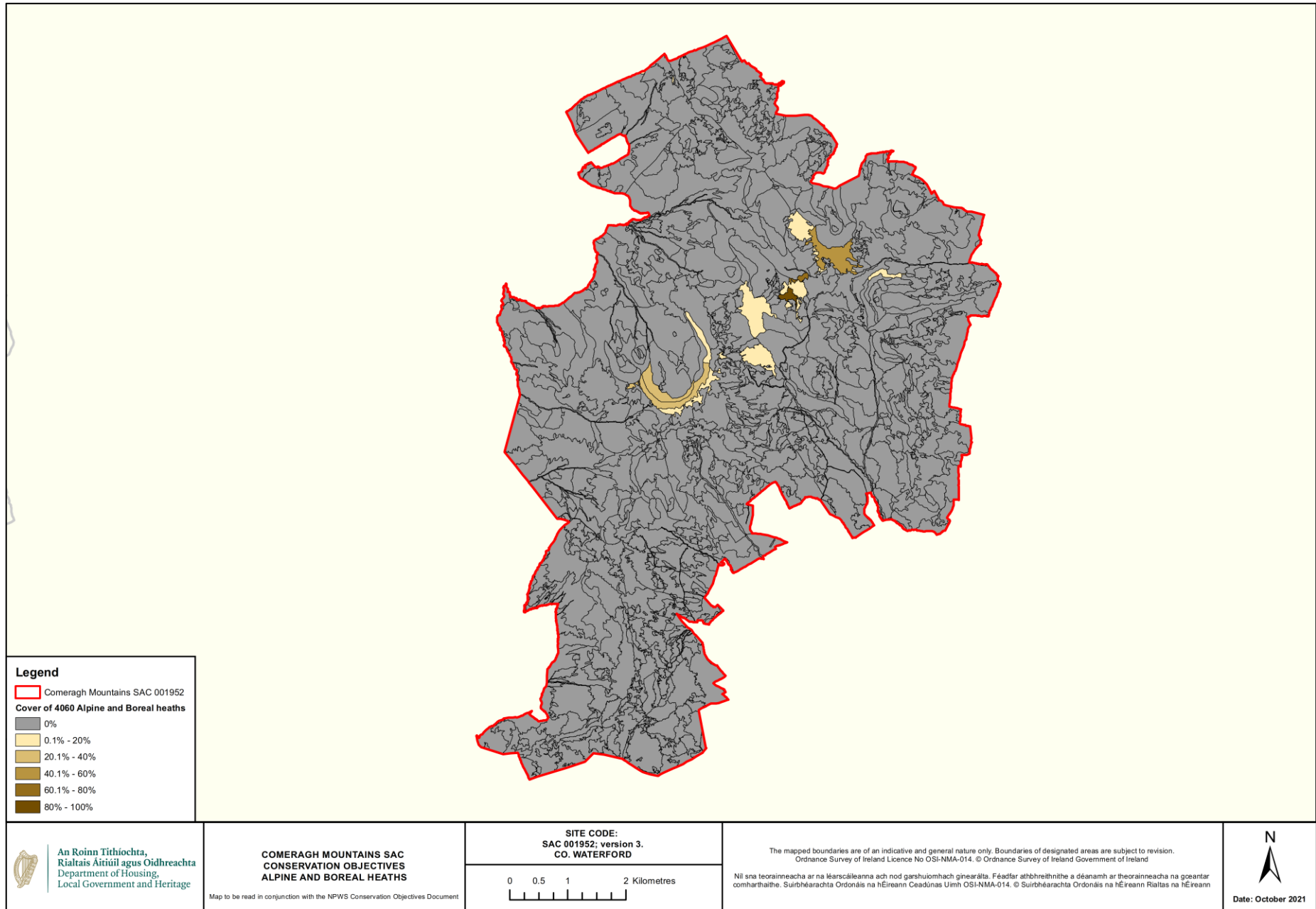
Map 1 Comeragh Mountains SAC Conservation Objectives – 4010 Wet Heaths



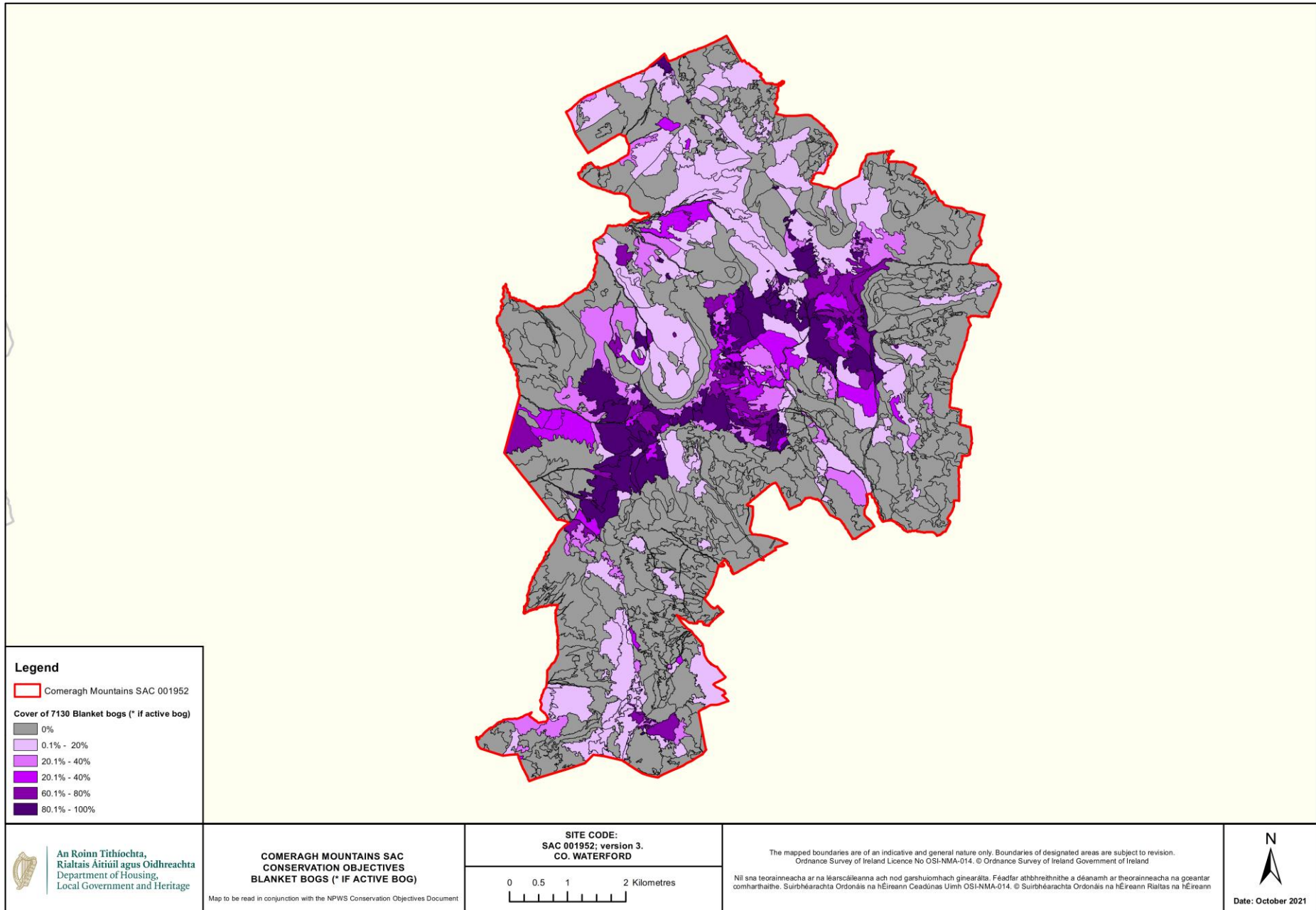
Map 2 Comeragh Mountains SAC Conservation Objectives – 4030 Dry Heaths



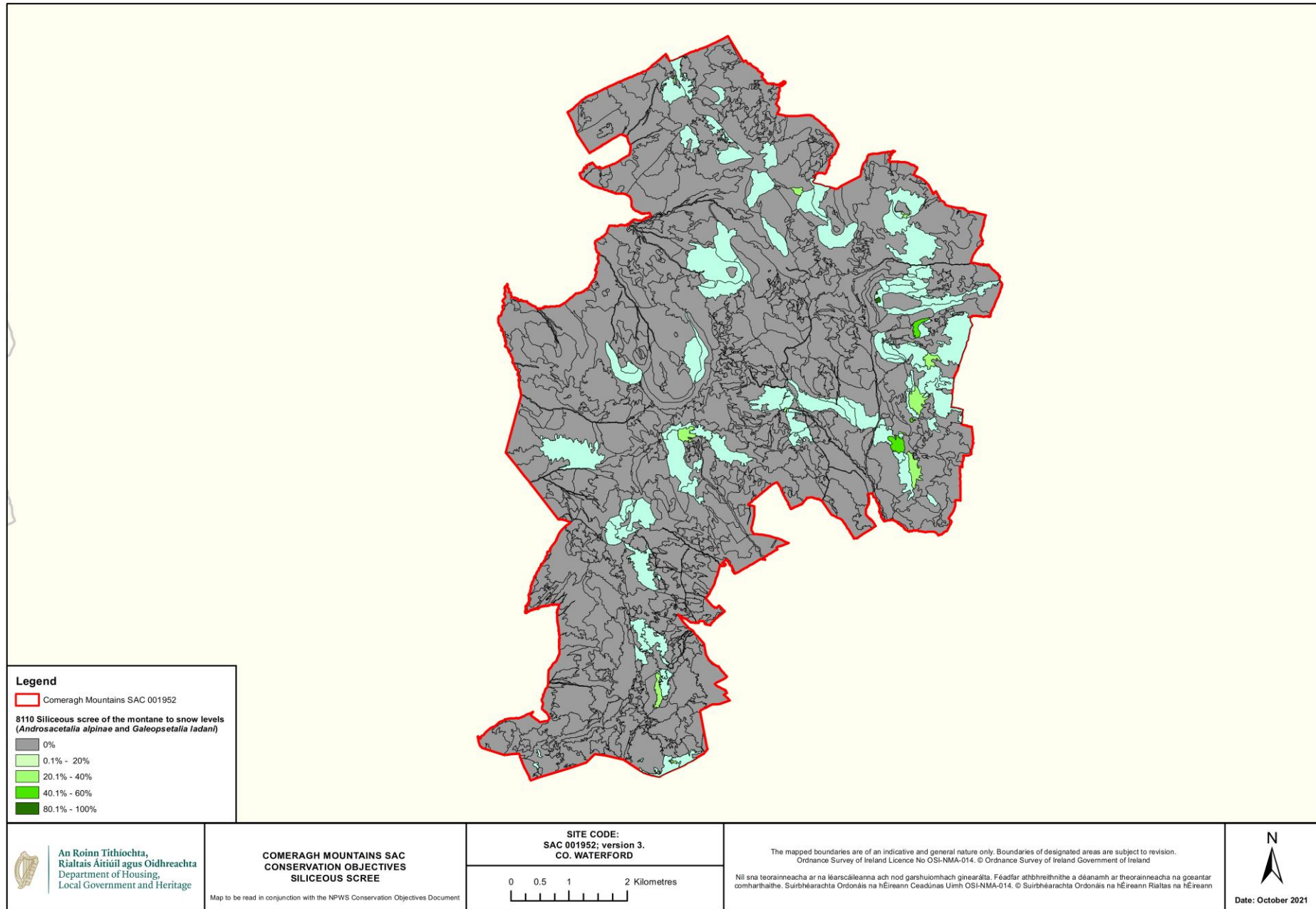
**Map 3 Comeragh Mountains SAC Conservation Objectives – 4060 Alpine and Boreal Heaths**



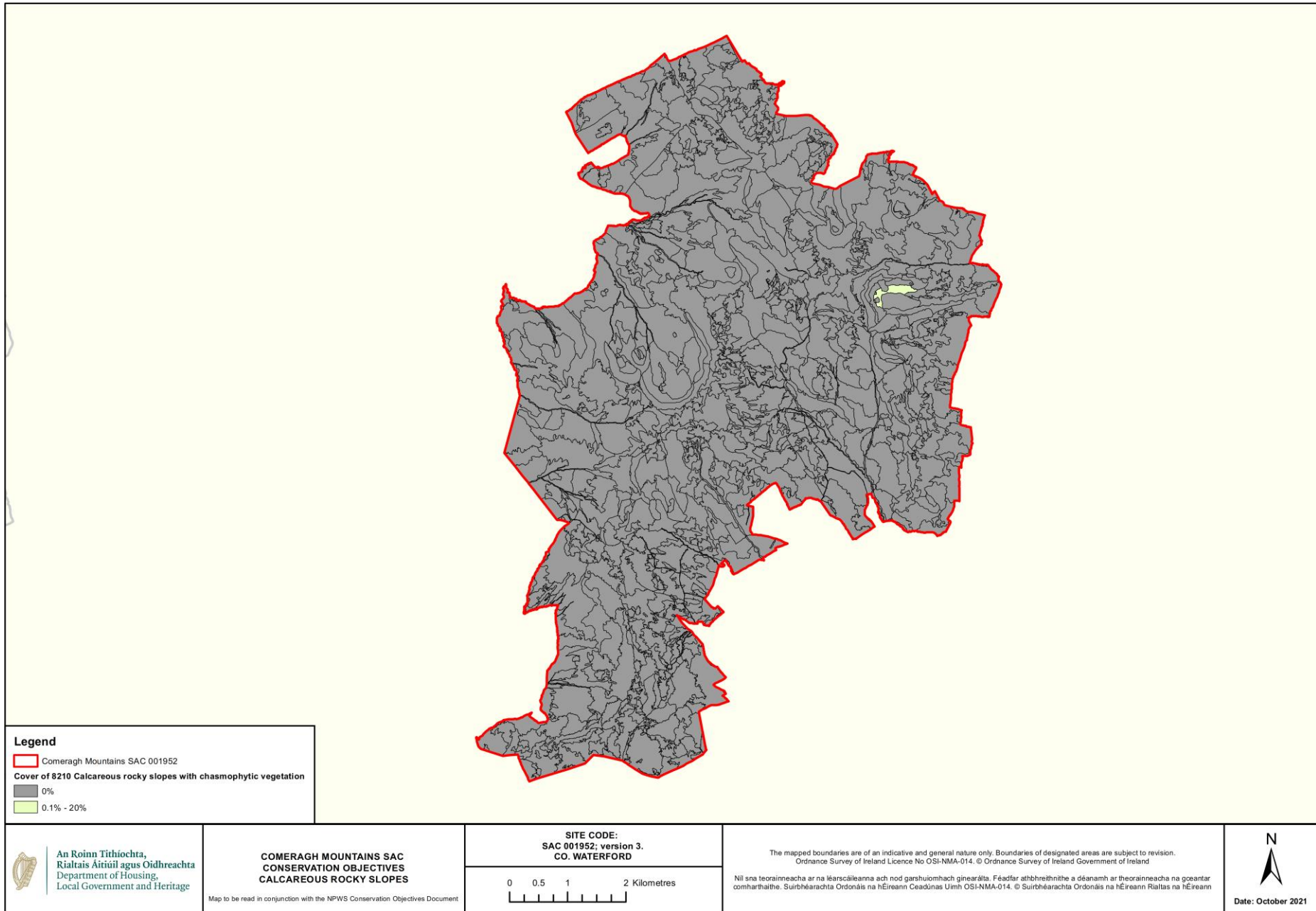
Map 4 Comeragh Mountains SAC Conservation Objectives – 7130 Blanket Bog (\* if active bog)



Map 5 Comeragh Mountains SAC Conservation Objectives – 8110 Siliceous Screes



Map 6 Comeragh Mountains SAC Conservation Objectives – 8210 Calcareous Rocky Slopes



**Map 7 Comeragh Mountains SAC Conservation Objectives – 8220 Siliceous Rocky Slopes**

