



14 June 2024

International and Offshore Energy Division,
South Coast DMAP Submission,
Department of the Environment, Climate and Communications,
29-31 Adelaide Road,
Dublin 2,
D02 X285

Dear Sir/Madam

Re: Draft South Coast Designated Maritime Area Plan for Offshore Renewable Energy (SC-DMAP)

GENERAL

The Heritage Council was established in 1995 as a statutory body under the Heritage Act 1995 with a Council (the Board of the body) appointed by the Minister. The Heritage Council is a prescribed body under the provisions of the Planning and Development Acts 2000-2010 and S.I. No. 600/2001 of the Planning and Development Regulations, section 28 inter alia, in accordance with its functions under Section 6 of the Heritage Act, 1995. We seek to provide submissions on forward planning, development control and strategic infrastructure developments as they relate to Ireland's heritage, namely built, cultural and natural heritage.

The Heritage Council recognise the need for the implementation of the Maritime Spatial Planning (MSP) Directive and support the National Marine Planning Framework (NMPF) 2018. Therefore, the Heritage Council support efforts to increase renewable energy rollout in Ireland and its territorial waters. Increased global temperatures and changing climate patterns will pose risks to natural ecosystems and habitats. Ireland's natural and built heritage is not exempt, with some of our habitats particularly susceptible to changing climate patterns. Mitigating climate change is a natural heritage issue, while more extreme weather and increased sea levels will undoubtedly threaten our historic built environment. Therefore, we acknowledge the need to roll out renewable energy schemes to reduce the country's carbon emissions.

It is also important to note that this is a relatively new frontier in Irish planning and the Heritage Council wish to contribute constructively to how these developments interact with our natural and built heritage. In this regard we welcome the preparation of the South Coast DMAP and support a plan led system for developments in the marine environment. A framework for project applications and ongoing monitoring of project impacts, especially in-combination impacts of cumulative projects is a critical consideration.

The *National Marine Planning Framework (NMPF) 2018* details several overarching maritime planning policies which deal with environmental policies (*Ocean Health*) and

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social (*Engagement with the Sea*). These policies cover heritage assets and seascapes/landscapes. Therefore, it is important to reiterate here that there is a need for any forthcoming maritime plans for offshore renewable energy (ORE) to ensure that there is strategic level heritage protection included in such plans. In this regard the Heritage Council note that there is policy provision in the draft SC DMAP for proposals, in the following order, to:

- a) avoid,
- b) minimise,
- or c) mitigate.

We strongly support this approach and would recommend that this draft maritime plan ensure that this is applied when assessing the impact of offshore fixed renewables on heritage assets. We therefore note that the SC DMAP will have policy objectives incorporating measures to avoid, minimise and/or mitigate potential adverse impacts, therefore ensuring that the objectives of the NMPF 2018 are followed through on, in maritime area plans. The Heritage Council would welcome this.

We have studied the draft plan in detail, and the associated environmental assessments. We note that it will be fixed offshore wind technology as opposed to floating turbines, with the latter recognised as still having a role in future offshore maritime plans. We would suggest, given that this is a relatively new frontier in Ireland, to provide a greater overview of the differences between the technologies, the benefits, costs, the engineering rationale, and environmental impacts of each, and therefore why fixed offshore is more suitable in this location, at this moment in time.

The Heritage Council will confine our comments to natural heritage and built heritage. In this regard, we will broadly base this on three key infrastructure requirements for offshore wind:

1. The fixed turbine and its physical construction on the seabed
2. The transmission links to the onshore grid connection
3. The associated port and harbour facilities for O&M (Operations and Maintenance)

The following features will be key considerations and we have covered these topics by chapter.

- Impacts on seafloor integrity, ecosystem, and general biodiversity, including the range and distribution of species both birds and marine animals.
- Designated sites particularly those closer to the shore and the South Wexford Seas SPA and any “Areas of Interest” for future proposed Marine Protected Areas (MPAs)
- Seascape and cultural heritage including wrecks
- Heritage assets in proximity to port and harbour facilities, including potential positive benefits in terms of new uses for heritage buildings

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DRAFT DMAP GEOGRAPHICAL AREA FOR OFFSHORE WIND DEVELOPMENTS

We welcome the environmental constraints analysis identified on Page 14 which has informed the site identification process for the DMAP for offshore renewable energy (ORE). In general terms, it is important to confirm that the constraints mapping has identified the correct sources and features that are required to inform site identification. The associated *South Coast DMAP: Maritime Area Identification* paper is an important document in this regard. Several “attributes” were included in sourcing the necessary geospatial environmental data. This appears to be a comprehensive list. However, in the current absence of legislative provision for designating marine protected areas (MPAs) it would be useful to review the 16 areas identified by the [Fair Seas Coalition](#) to determine if they could provide helpful sources/information. In addition, we would encourage the Department to expediate legislative protection for any such marine protected areas in tandem with such maritime area plans for ORE.

In terms of the *E5: Designated Sites*, there is a need to identify what are the NPWS sites e.g. SACs, SPAs, NHA, nature reserves? It does appear that the main ecological designations and features have been identified, particularly via the Marine Atlas Database. While we encourage more in-depth consultation with organisations such as the Marine Institute, the NPWS and the Irish Whale and Dolphin Group, Birdwatch Ireland, Fair Seas Coalition etc which will provide more location specific knowledge of marine animals/birds when further refining locations for ORE. In addition, it would be important to confirm that a step-based approach was undertaken whereby environment constraints were screened first, in order to exclude sensitive areas, before moving on to technical constraints. This is important as heritage considerations should not be secondary to other considerations.

The Heritage Council strongly support the idea of regional level surveys to inform future developments in Areas B, C, D. Although it is not fully clear in the draft plan the concept behind the regional level surveys. There is a need to more explicitly define, detail and explain the rationale and process behind these.

They are introduced in a paragraph under the heading of “Maritime Areas”. Whilst we note that the scope of these surveys is yet to be defined, we do assume that following the completion of Marine Area A, there will be a real time peer review case where the monitoring of impacts, particularly on ecology (included ex situ conservation impacts) will be undertaken. This will then inform future development trajectories for the other marine areas (B, C, D). This would be a very welcome endeavour and we would strongly support and commend its inclusion. Although that is not to say that inadequate surveys and data should be allowed for Marine Area A.

Given that this type of development is new in an Irish context, there is an obligation on early schemes to contribute to both scientific research and future ORE developments. In this regard we strongly welcome the inclusion of Policy Objective IGM 4: *Establish a dedicated offshore wind-maritime research programme in partnership with, and managed by the MI*. This should be a priority as there should be robust monitoring of such early

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schemes, particularly in terms of ecological impacts, which would be fundamental to the undertaking of the regional level surveys. It would also be beneficial to communicate such monitoring results to the general public and key stakeholders.

In addition, the GIS depository, whilst a good approach, will need to be moderated and managed in such a way that survey data and the scientific findings of early consents is easily interpreted. While the noted SC-DMAP Programme Implementation Board, through its sub committees, ought to ensure that it includes the relevant local authority staff to capture the consideration of environmental issues related to the transmission and associated grid infrastructure.

In general terms the Heritage Council believe that there needs to be a more explicit and comprehensive monitoring framework in the plan. Through the legislative designation approval process, we would recommend that appropriate budgetary support for staffing, monitoring and oversight, be provided for the implementing authority/department so that such monitoring can be adequately carried out. This could be reflected in some form of statement in the draft plan.

MARINE ENVIRONMENT AND BIODIVERSITY

How marine ecology and wider biodiversity issues are addressed through the draft SC DMAP is of key interest to the Heritage Council. The chapter that deals with the marine environment has correctly identified the important habitats and features of our marine environment. Its importance for fish, marine mammals, particularly cetaceans, and birds is of utmost importance. The Natura Impact Statement (NIS) and the Strategic Environmental Assessment (SEA) are pivotal in this regard.

However, the plan currently has a very weak policy objective for biodiversity. While there is a policy objective for marine sites included in this chapter which is more comprehensive, Policy Objective B1 refers only to the need to have regard to an extensive list of guidance documents. Given the adoption into this draft plan the required “*avoid, minimise, and mitigate*” from the NMPF 2018, there is an expectation that a far more robust policy for biodiversity would be provided. The geographical area of the identified sites, by virtue of the constraints mapping exercise is mostly in non-designated sites, covering an area of approximately 1,450 sqm, with the entire plan area being more than 8,000sqm. The impact of developments in this location and the associated interaction with biodiversity is largely unknown. The regional level surveys will undoubtedly uncover more specific information on impacts on features of marine ecology in the vicinity of the offshore installations, however the Heritage Council believes that a far more robust policy is needed in terms of Policy B1 in the SC DMAP. This should set out clear expectations for the required baseline information, assessment and monitoring.

At the same time, we re-iterate that although there is no statutory protection for marine protected areas there is [regulatory intention](#) to achieve this. MPA designations are envisaged to work in parallel with the Maritime Area Planning Act (2021). The South East

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Coast is a valuable marine hotspot and we wait with anticipation for the required legislation to be progressed for marine protected areas.

In terms of European designated sites, the NIS has a comprehensive discussion on what sites/ species have been screened in for the purposes of the NIS. These include several SACs and SPAs, which account for the presence of not just important habitats but also specific Annex I bird species. In this regard, it is surprising that the NIS does not envisage any adverse impacts on European protected sites from the draft Plan. It is true that the preliminary work has ensured that the site identification process avoided key environmental constraints, but it is unlikely that a maritime plan which provides for large physical installations of infrastructure (irrespective of it being a better approach than uncontrolled development) have no adverse effects on designated sites. It is particularly questionable that the assessment of policy objectives MA1 to MA3 do not envisage any adverse impacts on European protected sites.

Mitigating climate change by ensuring low carbon energy sources will have benefits for ecology including for the qualifying interests of the proximate SPAs and SACs that have been screened in for the purposes of this NIS, as well as their foraging habitats. This is discussed in the NIS and is valid. However, it is not valid to not discuss the immediate potential impact that large infrastructure such as this would have on the qualifying interests (QIs) of the local SPAs. In this specific case, it appears that a discussion of ex situ effects on the QIs of the SPAs in the area is missing in the assessment of Policy objectives MA1 to MA3.

It is important that the NIS assesses ex situ conservation for Annex I species in this regard. This should factor in species that will forage outside their designated sites and species whose migration routes to the designated sites overlap with the maritime plan's area. The protection afforded to these species is not limited to the defined SPA site boundary, but wherever the species may forage/migrate i.e. the ex-situ components of the SPA. Fulmar, Kittiwake, Gannet, Manx Shearwater and Puffin and other bird species which are qualifying interests of the proximate SPAs, may forage/migrate in these areas. More site-specific applications will address these issues in more detail but there is a need for the SC-DMAP to fully assess such matters in the associated environmental assessments. Given no mitigation is currently considered necessary in the assessment, the Heritage Council is concerned that this may be a considerable oversight.

Furthermore, the end-of-life stage for the turbines, particularly the subsea elements, where new reefs/ecosystems may develop during the lifetime of the windfarm needs to be considered. While lighting impacts from any aircraft anti-collision beacons should be considered.

CO-EXISTENCE

Our comments in this regard relate to Co-existence with Marine Archaeological and Cultural Heritage. We welcome the emphasis on underwater archaeology in this section and the policies that accompany it. We welcome the inclusion of policy AH1 in particular. The area in question has the highest concentration of marine wrecks in Irish Waters and

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these will need to be considered fully at more detailed planning application (EIA) stage. We suggest that exclusion zones around wrecks will be required and that ongoing liaison with the National Monuments Service Underwater Unit will be essential.

In addition, we refer to the practice of seascape character assessment and point to the report by The Marine Institute. (2020) *Definition and Classification of Ireland's Seascapes*. Minogue, R. et alia. This report took a regional approach to seascape assessment, and the area of this DMAP coincides with SCA12 - Celtic Sea Bays and Beaches and this approach may prove useful. It would also be of benefit to recognise any respective seascape character aspects (i.e. protected views) which may be included in the proximate county development plan objectives.

WHERE LAND MEETS SEA

The draft SC-DMAP identifies essential components that need to be in place for ORE systems, including strengthened “electricity grids, energy storage, supply to centres of high energy demand close to the ORE resource, interconnectors and port facilities that enable marshalling and assembly (M&A) and operations and maintenance (O&M)” of offshore wind development. In this regard the bringing on shore of cables and the associated port and harbour facilities will require infrastructure and facilities.

In this regard the “blue economy” identified in this section notes economic benefits to local communities. Whilst it will certainly bring environmental challenges, there are opportunities for indirect benefits for the historic environment.

Ireland suffers from vacancy and dereliction in villages, towns, and cities. The facilities that may be needed for O&M, grid connections, as well as more commercial/office space facilities are likely to need bespoke space requirements. Port and harbour technical specifics (i.e. draught and under keel clearance for vessels) for the servicing of offshore renewable installations, will of course have specific requirements and therefore the specific locations for port and harbour facilities will be guided by this. However, we would strongly encourage, where opportunities exist, that any new facilities, and associated residential accommodation, required for this blue economy actively seek out ‘at risk’ properties, both designated and non-designated heritage assets, to meet their space requirements. Bringing new uses to abandoned properties could be an important dividend that the new blue economy could bring to communities and heritage along the southeast coast. This should be captured in the associated Economic Chapter, which ought to be titled “socio-economic”.

OTHER MATTERS

Whilst noting the intention of publishing ORE guidelines in due course, the SC-DMAP includes for a Guidance Note as an interim measure. The timeline for the introduction of these guidelines should be fixed to be within a short period from the commencement date for project applications.

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In addition, it is necessary for all the associated environmental assessments to demonstrate how the assessments informed the drafting of the policy/objectives, whilst bearing in mind that the NIS and SEA process is an iterative process. In this regard, it is also important to explicitly recognise that project level assessments will be required to determine more detailed mitigation measures. While there is a need to also acknowledge the forthcoming legislation for marine protection areas within, and in tandem with this important plan.

CONCLUSION

The Heritage Council welcome this maritime plan for guiding renewable energy development in the marine environment. We do however believe, given that this is a novel endeavour in Ireland, that the preparation process for the SC-DMAP needs to be fully robust. This will set an important precedent going forward and we strongly recommend that careful consideration be given to the points made in this submission.

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