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Dear Marian

ISLES Draft Spatial Plan and Sustainability Appraisal Consultation

Thank you for consulting the Natural Resources Body for Wales (Natural Resources Wales) on the Draft Spatial Plan (hereafter referred to as ‘the Plan’) and Sustainability Appraisal. NRW’s comments are made in the context of our role as a consultation body under the Environmental Assessment of Plans and Programmes (Wales) Regulations 2004, as Statutory Nature Conservation Body under the Conservation of Habitats and Species Regulations 2010 (as amended), both as further amended by paragraph 189 of the Natural Resources Body for Wales (Functions) Order 2013, and as advisers to the Welsh Government on matters pertaining to the natural heritage of Wales and its coastal waters.

NRW’s comments on the Plan and Sustainability Appraisal are made without prejudice to any advice NRW may give on individual cabling projects that may come forward after adoption of the Plan or any decision NRW may be required to take on behalf of Welsh Government as Marine Licensing Authority for Welsh waters. Our comments are made in the context of our responsibilities for Wales and therefore focus on the potential effects on receptors in Welsh waters.


NRW welcomes and supports the strategic approach to further development of cabling infrastructure that the ISLES II ‘*Towards Implementation*’ project aims to achieve and believes that it represents a valuable mechanism for reducing environmental and consenting risks. NRW also believes that, in general, the approach to Sustainability Appraisal provides the basis for a comprehensive examination of the potential effects and measures required to mitigate any effects.

NRW is content with the overall conclusions of the SEA Environmental Report and the HRA of the Plan as far as that has been specified. We have however made a number of comments on the scope of the Plan and its future implementation, and on the SEA and the HRA. We have responded to the questions posed in the consultation letter in annex I and have expanded on our comments on the Plan, the SEA and the HRA separately in annexes II, III and IV respectively.

Our comments on the Plan, SEA Environmental Report and HRA should be read in conjunction with our comments in response to consultation on the SEA scoping report and the HRA pre-screening assessment report submitted to you on 7th November. In particular, in finalising the assessments it may be helpful to refer to the information sources cited in these responses.

If you have any questions about this response please contact our Marine Industries Advice Manager, Andrew Hill at andrew.hill@naturalresourceswales.gov.uk (tel. 03000 653808). Please note that future formal consultation on the Plan, including any post-adoption reports should be sent to the Strategic Assessment Team in NRW at strategic.assessment@cyfoethnaturiolcymru.gov.uk.

Yn gywir / Yours sincerely

A handwritten signature in black ink, appearing to read 'Rhian Jardine', with a long horizontal line underneath.

Rhian Jardine

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Croesewir gohebiaeth yn y Gymraeg a'r Saesneg Correspondence welcomed in Welsh and English

Annex I. Consultation questions

1) Do you agree with the approach used to develop the Plan? Are there aspects of the Draft Plan that you believe should be improved? Are there any aspects you believe should be taken forward differently?

NRW is strongly supportive of a strategic approach to planning and assessment of new cabling infrastructure.

We are concerned that the Plan has limited its consideration of potential effects to the marine environment only and takes no account of any effects on the terrestrial environment should any additional onward transmission infrastructure be required as a consequence of the Plan.

Other than that we are broadly supportive of the integrated approach that has been taken to planning and sustainability assessment but have made a number of comments on the Plan in annex II.

2) Do you have any views on the findings of the Sustainability Appraisal Report? Do you think that all the social, economic and environmental effects (positive and negative) have been identified? Are there other issues or alternative options that should be taken into account?

Please see our comments in Annexes III and IV.

3) The Socio-economic Impact Report has identified a range of potential impacts on existing sea users. Do you have any views on these findings? Do you think that the proposed mitigation measures would be effective? Do you have any additional suggestions?

We have no comments on the socio-economic impact report.

4) Do you agree that the Plan is a useful tool for greater co-ordination between Partner administrations? Please include any suggestions you have for further enhancing this co-ordination in future.

Yes. Although it would be helpful to clarify the relationship between *the Implementation Steering Committee* identified in the Plan (section 4.2), the *Plans Review Steering Group* (identified in Question 6 below) and the *Steering Group* identified in the HRA (Section 11) and the exact role of each group, or whether they are one and the same.

The creation of an overarching ISLES steering committee/group as a measure to mitigate potential effects of the Plan is particularly welcomed and will be an important factor in ensuring that the conclusions of the Sustainability Appraisal remain valid. In fact, as a mitigation measure that is relied upon to allow the HRA to conclude no adverse effect on site integrity, the Steering Group will be a necessary requirement for adopting the Plan. We would therefore welcome clarification about how and when the steering group will be convened, and about its terms of reference.

5) Does the plan provide suitable arrangements for monitoring environmental and social effects during the implementation of the Plan? If not please detail why and provide suggestions on how this could be improved.

The task of monitoring effects of the Plan appears to fall, at least in part, to the proposed ISLES Implementation Steering Committee (Section 4.2). Further information about the steering committee, its terms of reference, how it would operate and be resourced is needed but in principle this approach appears to have the potential to provide the necessary mechanism.

6) The Plan, if implemented, should be reviewed to take account of actual development and increasing knowledge of development factors. How often do you believe this should be done and

why? Who do you believe should be involved in the Plans Review Steering Group, to oversee the review process?

The Plan should be reviewed frequently and at intervals that allow consideration of changes to predicted cabling activity, in particular as individual projects come forward, but also in response to the findings of the required monitoring of the Plan. Scoping work on individual projects has begun and it should be possible to determine how and when the Plan, and critically the guidance it contains, might need to be adapted as projects develop. In addition, the Plan should be sensitive to changes in other development plans that may result in energy infrastructure that will require electricity transmission capacity.

In addition to Plan partners, it is important to seek involvement of those other countries who would be expected to accommodate cabling infrastructure. Should cabling infrastructure pass through or make landfall in Wales, and as an advisor to Welsh Government on natural heritage and the coastal waters of Wales, and as the authority with delegated responsibility for issuing Marine Licences in Welsh waters, it would be appropriate for NRW to be a member of the group (and other identified steering groups should they be different). However, any NRW involvement would need to be subject to the availability of capacity and the needs of other priority work.

7) Are you aware of any additional on-going research or monitoring that may help to fill gaps in the evidence base, particularly relating to the marine environment and its interactions with subsea electricity cables? Please give details of additional relevant sources.

No.

8) Do you have any other comments you wish to make on the Plan and / or the related assessments

Please see our comments in annexes II, III and IV.

Annex II. NRW comments on the Plan.

Reducing risk at the project level

1. NRW understands that much of the information about the nature and location of project activities is not available and that consenting and assessment will be in a better position to consider potential impacts as projects come forward. This is a legitimate approach given the high level nature of the Plan, but there would be significant benefit in considering the potential effects of the Plan in greater detail.
2. To that end, NRW considers that it would be useful to consider additional iterations of the Plan, or the creation of a second tier of plans, that encompass more detailed planning and assessment of individual Network or Landfall Areas. This would allow better discrimination of the environmental and consenting risks and suitable mitigation and provide greater certainty for developers.

Locational Guidance and the application of routeing principles

3. In principle NRW strongly supports the locational guidance and routeing strategy as an aid to project scoping and as a way of reducing project risk. However, whilst NRW considers that the guidance provides an indication of sensitivities that might be encountered it is insufficiently detailed or comprehensive to allow developers to judge the risks associated with individual landfall locations, or for plan makers to indicate the favoured options for deploying cabling infrastructure.
4. The routeing principles are an important way of highlighting the broad approaches that project development should follow in order to reduce or avoid environmental effects. However, it is unclear how plan-makers will ensure that the principles will be applied at the project level especially after the ISLES II project has been completed, which we understand will be in May 2015. They do not therefore currently provide any certainty that good practice will be followed.

Project Level Assessment

5. The Plan document concludes that the Plan can be developed without significant environmental or social effects (Section 3.2 page 14). Whilst it may be possible to conclude that the Plan as defined will not have significant environmental effects, the lack of routeing definition and, therefore, detailed assessment, prevents any conclusion that the project development that may follow will not result in significant effects. This will be dependent upon robust assessment and mitigation at the project level which should not be prejudiced by any conclusions drawn at the plan level. Potential developers should therefore be made aware that more detailed assessment will be needed at the project level and that this will require information that is additional to that presented in the Plan and Sustainability Appraisal.

Grid connection

6. The Plan is for an interconnected offshore electricity transmission network within the marine area of the partner countries and the waters and coastlines of England, Wales and the Isle of Man. Connecting additional interconnector infrastructure to the grid may also require significant new or upgraded terrestrial transmission infrastructure beyond that required for local grid connection and which can have serious effects on natural heritage. Currently there is no consideration of the implications of new interconnector infrastructure for the existing terrestrial grid transmission network. This limits the ability of the Plan to consider the risks associated with potential landfall areas. The Plan should consider the likelihood that additional onward transmission infrastructure will be needed in Wales and elsewhere and, where this is the case, what the environmental implications will be and how these can be mitigated. See our comments on the SEA, Annex III, paragraphs 24.

7. There is also very little consideration of the implications of infrastructure (converter stations etc) that will be required at grid connection points. Such infrastructure can be significant in scale and the Plan could provide a better indication of good network alternatives if this was considered. This would also help to mitigate against potentially serious risks that would need to be addressed by terrestrial consents and permissions.
8. Neither the Plan nor the Sustainability Appraisal make any reference to National Grids' Electricity Ten Year Statement which aims to clarify future grid development requirements. The Statement considers offshore grid requirements and so it will be important to consider any possible synergies or conflicts with the ISLES Plan.

Welsh Planning Policy

9. The Plan document describes the policy context that relates to the marine area but makes no reference to Welsh planning policy that may apply beyond the proposed National Marine Plan (Section 2.2). Consistency with the emerging Welsh National Marine Plan will be critical, but given that the Plan may result in significant new intertidal and terrestrial cable infrastructure it is also important that it fully reflects Welsh planning policy as defined by Planning Policy Wales (7th Edition, 2014) and the supporting Technical Advice Notes (TANs) as well as the requirements of Local Development Plans.
10. The locational objectives for Material Assets summarised in the Locational Guidance (Section 2.2 page 17) should include reference to the need to avoid detrimentally affecting flood risk prevention measures such as coastal defences.

Actions and Next Steps

11. NRW agrees that there is a need to improve our understanding of the effects of cables on the environment, particularly in relation to the effects of EMF. However the Policy Actions described under Data Collection, Sharing and Knowledge Gaps, such as measures for collating, managing and disseminating data are unlikely to prove adequate in addressing this information gap. Primary research is needed to further our understanding of this issue, which could be critical given the amount of cabling activity that may come forward in areas where electro-sensitive species are likely to be present.
12. NRW agrees that decisions about individual projects should take account of the routing principles and other relevant information in the Locational Guidance. In fact this will be an important way of ensuring that the Plan will not have significant effects on the environment.

Landscape & Seascape

13. NRW welcomes the principle that offshore cable routes and collector hubs avoid areas where they would be detrimental (Section 8.3 page 42) but consider that this should take account of sea and landscape character rather than simply consider 'areas of highest amenity value'. Of greatest concern, however, would be the potential effect of land-based grid connection infrastructure, which can be very large and should be located and designed in appropriate manner. See our comments on the SEA, Annex III, paragraph 20.

Network Area Guidance

14. NRW welcomes the descriptions of the Network Areas and consider that they provide a useful overview of the character of each area. However, it should be made clear that the information provided is not comprehensive and users should access the necessary information from appropriate original sources. For instance, the nature conservation sites listed for areas associated with Wales are not identified exhaustively and the descriptions of landscape and seascape make no reference to important landscape character assessments that are available for Wales. We have made a number of comments on the Network Area Assessments that form part of the SEA and these should be taken into

account when finalising the Locational Guidance. We would also refer you to our previous letter dated 7th November 2014 in response to the SEA scoping consultation in which we outline a number of sources information that should reviewed to provide a more representative characterisation of Welsh environmental features and potential constraints.

Cable Protection

15. The effects of adding cable protection will need to be carefully evaluated at the project level when individual cable routes are known and for its use to be avoided where significant damage to sensitive receptors might be predicted as a consequence. As a general principle NRW would advocate the minimisation of cable protection to reduce the amount of material that is deposited in the marine environment. See our comments on the SEA, Annex III, paragraph 19.

Invasive and non-native species (INNS)

16. Deploying additional infrastructure in the marine environment can lead to the creation of artificial surfaces that will support populations of INNS that can have serious effects on native or other existing biodiversity. This is identified as a potential risk by the Generic Assessments within the SEA but should also be considered as a potential generic effect within the Plan supported by a recommendation in the Guidance for production of a biosecurity plan/risk assessment for all relevant aspects of cabling activity. See also our comments on the HRA in ANNEX IV paragraph 40. Useful guidance to support biosecurity risk assessment has been produced by the oil and gas industry and should be used to inform best practice¹.

¹ Alien Invasive Species and the Oil and Gas Industry. Guidance for Prevention and management. IPIECA. 2010.

Annex III. NRW Comments on the SEA

18. The conclusions of the HRA are that project level HRA will be needed to mitigate against adverse effects and clearly sets out the key mitigations that may need to adopt at the project level. The SEA should also make explicit reference to the requirement for consenting and assessment at the project level in order to justify the conclusion of no adverse effects.

Generic Assessment

Benthic & Intertidal Ecology - Operation of marine cables

19. NRW agrees that the effects of additional cable protection measures can lead to gain or loss of habitat (Section 7.2 p33 paragraph 4) and that the presence of new hard surfaces may result in changes to prey and species behaviour. However, this section also includes the statement that '*any increase is likely to be limited as protection measures will be used where [cable] burial is not possible (e.g. hard substrate areas) and these locations are already likely to support more diverse communities*'. NRW does not agree with the last part of this statement which implies that hard substrate communities are less sensitive because they are more diverse. Hard substrate communities can be more diverse but can also comprise of species that are delicate, and are often protected under the Habitats Directive. This does not alter the overall conclusions of the assessment but it should be made clear that the use of cable protection can have undesirable effects and should be minimised or, where absolutely necessary, restricted to areas not inhabited by such species.

Landscape & Seascape

20. Significant land-based infrastructure can be required to allow connection of cables to the national grid. The potential effects of this should be considered. For the assessment of potential impacts of the Plan on Seascape and Landscape receptors in Wales we would recommend the plan makers refer to the 2009 CCW policy research report on seascapes in Wales and their sensitivity to offshore developments in Wales (see link <http://www.ccw.gov.uk/landscape--wildlife/protecting-our-landscape/seascapes.aspx>). LANDMAP is the formally adopted approach for landscape assessments in Wales and is advocated by the Welsh Government. The LANDMAP website hosts information on the LANDMAP methodology, provides access to all quality assured LANDMAP Information either through the interactive on-line GIS or as a download of GIS maps and surveys (see: <http://www.ccw.gov.uk/landscape--wildlife/protecting-our-landscape/landmap.aspx?lang=en>). The plan should also refer to Local Development Plans and National Park and AONB Management Plans which also set out the requirements for protecting the landscape.

Effects on Biodiversity

21. A number of biodiversity receptors are out with the scope of the plan level HRA but are nevertheless protected by UK law. These include European Protected Species (EPS), nationally protected species and habitats, Biodiversity Action Plan (BAP) habitats and species, landscape/seascape and cultural interests and Water Framework Directive (WFD) water bodies. Whilst it would not be appropriate to include consideration of effects on such receptors within the plan-level HRA, we do consider that strategic examination of these issues at the plan level could remove possible areas of difficulty for developers at the project level. Limited reference to some of these assessments has been made in the effects tables for each Network Area and we understand that more detailed analysis is difficult given the level of spatial prescription for activities considered by the Plan. However, this further highlights the value of more detailed planning at the Network or Landfall Area level (see our comments in Annex I, paragraph 2).

Network Area Assessments

22. The descriptions of mitigation for protected sites and features (Tables 9.1 and 10.1) should reflect the need for all works to avoid significant adverse effects in all cases, taking into account the conservation objectives of the sites and features in question.
23. In order to avoid or reduce the risk of injury to seals, vessels using damaging dynamic positioning technologies should be avoided.
24. The operational effects on landscape are considered by the assessment to be confined to collector hubs. The potential effect of terrestrial grid connection and onward transmission infrastructure (during 'operation') is not considered within the Network Area Assessments. This is a significant weakness in the assessment (and Plan) and risks significantly underestimating the potential effects of cabling activity that may come forward as a consequence of the Plan. Grid connection infrastructure can be large and onward transmission upgrades can result in new overhead electricity cabling. An analysis of the need for such infrastructure should be used to determine need for further assessment of the terrestrial implications. This could inform a review of the suitability of landfall locations which, in turn, would help to avoid serious difficulties at the project level should interconnector cable routing lead to landfall at sensitive locations or at locations that necessitate new or upgraded onward transmission infrastructure.

Environmental Effects and Mitigation Summaries

25. Our comments on the generic and Network Area assessments (paragraphs 19-24) should also be taken into account in finalising the summaries of environmental effects (section 11) and the typical mitigation summaries (Section 12).

In-combination and Cumulative Effects

26. The effects of the Plan in-combination and cumulatively with other plans, programmes or strategies ('other plans') are not considered in any detail. There is no rigorous assessment of the interactions between the Plan and any other plans beyond stating that the Plan will need to comply with the legislation, policies, principles and, or any other measures associated with other plans (Appendix A) and an assertion that the Plan is compatible with all policy themes which are designed to support offshore renewables, marine planning, carbon reduction and environmental protection (Section 11.4). The assessment of the interactions between the Plan and the list of policies and programmes, including those that relate to other sectors and Wales, should more specifically explain the potential negative interactions and how these should be mitigated. The Scottish Marine Plan provides a useful example of how such an analysis might be presented.
<http://www.gov.scot/Publications/2013/07/7449/8#t5>
27. Arguably this is most important in the context of development plans such as oil and gas licensing plans, energy generation plans and aggregate extraction. These have not been referred to in Appendix A but should be considered.
28. The SEA should also systematically consider the interrelationships between all of the environmental factors considered by the SEA.
29. Section 11 is entitled 'In-combination and Cumulative Effects' but is more a summary of the overall effects of the Plan with limited reference to in-combination and cumulative effects which makes following the logic of the assessment confusing. Arguably, the overall conclusions of the SEA should be presented separately following the assessment of in-combination and cumulative effects and the summary of plan and project mitigations.

Annex IV. NRW Comments on the HRA

30. NRW is broadly content with approach taken to the HRA and agrees with its overall conclusions. For the most part, the plan-level mitigations appear to be appropriate and the project level mitigations provide a suitable description of the measures that are likely to be necessary to avoid and, or minimise project impacts. NRW welcomes the clear articulation of some of the requirements and mitigations that projects should follow (Section 10). It will be critical that these are effectively communicated to project developers and regulators.
31. It should be noted that we have not comprehensively reviewed information about all Welsh sites and features in the Appendices. Ramsar Information Sheets and SAC and SPA Natura 2000 Standard Data forms (in conjunction with the 2001 Review of the Birds Directive), which are all available to download from the Joint Nature Conservation Committee's (JNCC) website, and provide the definitive information on site features which should be used to inform the Appropriate Assessment.
32. NRW has provided a number of comments below aimed at improving clarity and robustness of the assessment.

General Comments on the Screening and Appropriate Assessment Information Report

35. The sensitivity of some features may have been underestimated. For example, the sensitivity of individual features of habitat types (e.g. intertidal and supralittoral habitats) can vary (e.g. some Reef habitats are extremely sensitive, such as *Modiolus* beds, whilst a 'standard' bedrock reef may be less vulnerable). As a further example, the 'low' vulnerability assessment of reefs to pathway 13 (p. 30) does not acknowledge, for example, the potential for significant effects on *Sabellaria alveolata* reef. Providing a range which encompasses all the different types of Annex I habitat, including the most sensitive, would allow a more robust approach to be maintained.
36. We note that there are some inconsistencies with the use of terminology within the '*Screening and Appropriate Assessment Information Report*'. Inconsistency in the application of terms such as 'high' 'medium' and 'low' used in the narrative and the tables creates confusion and uncertainty about the level of precaution used. For example, on Table 9, pathway 10, the 'vulnerability' is summarised as low but the text refers to a medium 'sensitivity', as well as there being an acknowledgement of greater impact on sensitive species elsewhere in the narrative. The terms 'risk', 'sensitivity' and 'vulnerability' should be clarified and applied consistently.
37. We consider the descriptive nature of some of the narrative makes it unclear how the assessment of vulnerability has been derived. For example, Section 7.2.2, gives a review of the literature but does not link this to the development and its likely impacts, making it unclear how the assessment of vulnerability in Table 17 has been derived. We note that, in comparison, the narrative in Section 4.2 provides more clarity.
38. It is unclear if a number of features have been assessed as they are not recognised within '*Assessment Stage 8*'. Some of these features are then named in Table 6 (Estuaries and Reefs) but not all, and section 4.1.1. should explicitly include the following features: 1130 Estuaries, 1330 Atlantic Salt Meadows, 1310 *Salicornia*, 1140 Mudflats and Sandflats not covered by sea water at low tide, and 1170 Reefs. The approach creates confusion, making it difficult to determine whether impacts to the features have been correctly identified.
39. We consider that a single tidal excursion is adequate for cable laying activities. However, it is possible that there may be specific activities and/or locations at a project level where additional modelling may be required to determining the spatial limit of impact pathways in all cases (e.g. for substations).
40. The increased risk of colonisation of INNS from vessels and plant being moved from different areas should be identified. The mitigation required to avoid biological disturbance and so allow a conclusion of no adverse effect on habitat features is unclear (it is not specified in Section 10 as indicated in Table 6). This mitigation measure should refer to the need to undertake biosecurity risk assessments on relevant activities.
41. We consider that impact pathway 4 represents direct, rather than indirect, damage to habitats, as the damage is caused by activities directly associated with the Plan.

42. It is important that the Appropriate Assessment takes account of the condition and conservation status of features of European and international sites, as well as the Conservation Objectives. For example, whilst section 4.3 considers the Conservation Objectives, it does not consider the condition and conservation status of features of European and international sites.
43. Impacts on Habitats Directive Annex I habitats outside of protected sites should also be considered to ensure compliance with Article 10 of the Directive². NRW considers that the aim of the Habitats Directive to achieve Favourable Conservation Status (FCS) of Annex I habitats appears, through Article 10, to relate to the entire resource of a habitat type, at least in terms of extent, rather than applying only to the occurrence within the SAC network.
44. A number of relevant projects, plans or activities have not been included in the '*Potential In-Combination Effects*' for example Shoreline Management Plans, Welsh National Marine Plan, English marine plans. We also consider that the reference to '*terrestrial developments potentially affecting otter features*' should also be applied to migratory fish.
45. Please note that Welsh Government and Natural Resources Wales are currently sharing information on a number of sea areas around Wales currently being considered for possible identification as new Special Areas of Conservation (SACs) and Special Protection Areas (SPAs). According to scientific evidence, the areas concerned are considered to support internationally important populations of Harbour porpoise and species of seabirds. Decisions on whether to designate SACs and SPAs in Welsh waters are made by the Welsh Minister for Natural Resources and no such decisions have yet been taken. If the minister decides to proceed with these proposals, they will be subject to full public consultation later in the year, before any decisions are taken about whether to designate each area. Once ministers have approved formal consultation on these areas (anticipated July 2015), it is Government policy that the possible sites should be treated as designated in terms of assessments, until the Minister has decided whether or not to designate them. Depending on the exact timing of completion, it may be necessary to include these within the Plan HRA. Further information email marine.n2k@naturalresourceswales.gov.uk

Detailed comments on the AIIR and the approach to Appropriate Assessment

Habitat Features:

46. We note that a number of coastal features, for example, '*humid dune slacks*', '*petalwort*', '*fen orchid*', and '*narrow-mouthed whorl snail*', have been screened out of the Appropriate Assessment. Other dune features have been screened into the assessment and there is inconsistency between the assessments in Section 4, which conclude adverse effect for supralittoral habitats, and Appendix A where coastal habitats are mostly screened out (e.g. perennial vegetation of stony banks for Cemlyn Bay). Coastal habitats should be screened into the Appropriate Assessment.
47. Section 4.2 '*Sensitivity and Potential Vulnerability of Habitat Interest Features to ISLES Spatial Plan Activities*' includes a number of inaccuracies, omissions and, or statements that require further clarification. NRW therefore advises the following:
 - A number of other habitats in addition to Reefs (e.g. seagrass beds), are also sensitive to increased turbidity and smothering.
 - Some Large Shallow Inlets and Bays and Estuaries contain highly sensitive habitats that are not necessarily encompassed by the other habitats assessed as implied (e.g. seagrass beds, oyster beds, maerl beds).
 - Direct habitat loss (*impact pathway 1*) should be included as a potential impact pathway for reefs, intertidal habitats and supralittoral habitats.

² Article 10 of the Habitats Directive states that... 'Member States shall endeavour, where they consider it necessary, in their land-use planning and development policies and, in particular, with a view to improving the ecological coherence of the Natura 2000 network, to encourage the management of features...which are of major importance for wild fauna and flora'. For sites to be ecologically 'coherent' they need to have links outside their designated area, in order to ensure that Annex I habitats and Annex II species can be maintained in favourable conservation status in the long term.

Birds

48. Despite being illustrated in 'Figure 4 – Screened in SPAs...' Welsh SPA Extensions appear to be screened out of further assessment (p.10). We disagree with this and advise that the Welsh SPA extensions (as formally designated sites) should be included within the HRA.
49. Note that Guillemot is part of the 'seabird assemblage' feature on Skokholm and Skomer should be taken through to Appropriate Assessment stage.
50. Cors Fochno & Dyfi Estuary Ramsar site should be screened into the Appropriate Assessment as, in common with the Dyfi Estuary SPA which has been taken forward, it has migratory wildfowl ('Greenland white fronted geese') as an interest feature.
51. We would advise identification of species of the waterfowl assemblage on Liverpool Bay SPA.

Marine Mammal

53. We consider that a distance of 80km, as identified in the evidence presented, would provide a robust and precautionary approach when considering noise impacts.
54. We note the potential effects to some mammals have been identified and welcome the proposed use of the 'statutory nature conservation authority protocol'. It will be important to ensure the implementation of this protocol at a project level to maintain the conclusions of the plan-level HRA.
55. The potential effects of disturbance caused by noise and vibration on prey species of marine mammals, birds and fish should be added to the impact pathways.

Otter

56. The home range of otters often exceeds 10km (the boundary used as a buffer distance in the Plan). Otter features associated with terrestrial European Sites are known to utilise the coast for foraging. The relevant terrestrial sites should therefore be scoped into the Appropriate Assessment.
57. The following impact pathways have been omitted from the HRA and should be included – toxic contamination (Pathway ref. 12 & 13) and non-toxic contamination (Pathway ref. 14). These would primarily impact on prey species but may also affect the otter's ability to forage in locations previously used.
58. Structures likely to cause entrapment should also be considered.

Bats

52. Bat interest features should be screened into the assessment as the basis for screening out bat interest features is incorrect, stating: '[Bats are] unlikely to migrate across the Irish Sea and forage within coastal habitats'. Contrary to the statement, bats are known to forage offshore and hibernate and roost in the coastal zone (BSG Ecology, 2014).