

Sue Burton

By email only

18th October 2019

Dear Sue,

SEAGRASS RESTORATIO PROJECT, DALE

I am writing as manager of NRW's Operations Marine Service to confirm that, without prejudice to any permissions that may be needed for the project, NRW is fully supportive of the seagrass restoration project and its twin aims of restoring seagrass beds and involving the local community in conservation.

NRW were engaged in the initial project discussions and were content with the projects ethos of not altering people's livelihoods or way of life. We recognise this innovative project is also intended as a pilot to establish the effectiveness of the approach.

The area is within Pembrokeshire Marine Special Conservation Area (SAC) and restoration of seagrass is appropriate and necessary to help manage and improve the condition of the site and its features. In terms of protection, the seabed off Dale is within the 'Large Shallow Inlet and Bay' feature of the SAC. This means that any *new* plan or project will need to be assessed according to its impacts on this wider feature whether the seagrass bed, and any associated fauna (including, for example, seahorses), are there or not. The restoration project will not change this existing statutory assessment process.

It is NRW's view that the existing network of Marine Protected Areas (MPAs) in Wales, including all marine SACs, are all multiple-use sites, and should be managed according to risk to the features. We have stated this in our formal evidence to the National Assembly for Wales CCERA Committee's inquiry into the management of MPAs.

Many activities already happen in and around the existing seagrass and the project is looking to restore and extend seagrass cover within this context of existing activity. There are no plans to introduce any ban on existing mooring or any of the current activities either in the existing seagrass area or the area selected for seagrass restoration. We understand and fully support the project aims to work with local interest, including boat users, in order to restore seagrass without affecting livelihoods. In doing so this is a great opportunity to demonstrate how local activities and conservation can, and do, positively and readily go hand in hand. Seagrass beds offer a wide range of benefits from improved

water clarity to acting as fish nursery areas which will benefit sea users and help achieve conservation goals.

We understand there may be anxiety that the project is seeking to change the status of the area to a highly protected site. We recognise the anxiety this will create given previous WG proposals for a highly protected MCZ in the Dale area. These plans were formally withdrawn by WG and at no point has any advice been given from NRW that the proposal be revisited. We wish to reassure local interests on this point.

In recent years we have been working with Welsh Government and the UK Joint Nature Conservation Committee (JNCC) to assess how coherent the overall network of MPAs in Wales is, and whether we have enough coverage of the breadth of habitats and species found in Welsh waters. WG now have a project to address the few gaps that have been identified in the MPA network as a result of the joint NRW-JNCC network assessment in 2016. The gaps identified are predominantly for subtidal sediment habitat types, and it is likely that the offshore area (beyond 12nm) will represent the most suitable options for filling these gaps. WG have also confirmed that any new MCZs designated in this process would be multiple-use with management based on risk to features. Furthermore, the analysis we carried out with JNCC in 2016 concluded that the coverage of seagrass is well represented in the existing network of MPAs (based on the OSPAR ecological network coherence principles), we do not therefore need further designations for this habitat. Our emphasis is therefore on management and condition of existing seagrass beds in existing sites, which we have confirmed above are clearly considered multiple use sites existing alongside current activity.

If you require further details from NRW, please do let me know.

With best wishes for the project.

Kind regards,



Andrea Winterton
Rheolwr Gwasanaeth Morol, Gweithrediadau /
Marine Service Manager, Operations