

West Kirby beach management position statement

An area of 0.5ha of vegetation is due to be removed in West Kirby as part of ongoing amenity beach management carried out by Wirral Borough Council. The vegetation to be removed is an assemblage of transitional Atlantic salt meadow. This would support the development of embryonic dune systems if left untouched. These marshes are nationally rare habitats and accreting only in small pockets around the UK, including on the Wirral coastline. In much of the south of the UK these habitats are being lost to erosion and coastal squeeze.

According to Natural England's Priority Habitat Inventory 2023 there is 583 Ha of Priority Coastal Saltmarsh Habitat in the Borough of Wirral and 1871 Ha of Priority Coastal Saltmarsh Habitat on the English side of the Dee Estuary. This continually expanding marsh affords unrivalled protection for coastal communities facing the ongoing and future impacts of climate change and sea level rise.

Following assessment by the Council as responsible authority and based on current data and advice, provided by Natural England, it was agreed that this removal would not have a long-term negative impact on the Dee Estuary SSSI unit. This is due to level of ongoing accretion of sediment and establishment of vegetation at this site.

Current systems and processes for assessment of this work have been followed appropriately in this case. However, we question whether these processes remain fit for purpose. Assessing designated units or areas in isolation from one another does not tell us the full story. We should be considering the full extent of these nationally rare habitats when making decisions about their management, as nature is not restricted by borders.

Saltmarsh is being lost nationally at a rate of around 100 Ha per year, and as highly efficient carbon sinks hosting a unique abundance of biodiversity, we are blessed to see these systems naturally expanding on our northwest coastlines. In the face of both a climate and biodiversity emergency the Cheshire Wildlife Trust believe that the unnecessary destruction of this pocket of important habitat is a step backwards. Taking us further from our goal to see 30% of our land and sea to be protected and well managed to support nature's recovery by 2030.

Supporting information

Raking of the amenity beach at West Kirby by Wirral Council to remove debris has been a long-standing practice, assent for this activity has been provided by Natural England covering the period up until 2027. Guidance has been provided by Natural England to Wirral Council to assure that they must take responsibility for surveying the area and avoiding destruction of any protected species. Any damage or removal of protected species may incur enforcement procedures initiated by Natural England.

During 2023 an additional assessment was undertaken following request by Wirral Council to remove vegetation from an area of 0.5ha adjacent to the amenity beach. Following site visits and assessment of the SSSI unit, based on best available data to Natural England, it was advised that, based on the short-term nature of the activity, this temporary loss could be allowed for. The total area to be removed equates to 0.02% of the total area of saltmarsh within the SSSI unit, based on accretion rates it was deemed that this small-scale loss would not have a significant impact on the condition of the SSSI unit over the three-year period of assent.

As responsible authority the council are legally responsible for carrying out the habitat regulations assessment (HRA) prior to applying for assent. Natural England do not hold the authority to allow or prevent carrying out of such practices by the responsible authority, only to provide best practice guidance and advice relating to HRA outputs.

The vegetation being removed is an assemblage of transitional Atlantic salt meadow and forming embryonic dunes. These are nationally rare habitats (around 1000 Ha remaining in the UK) and accreting only in small pockets, including on the Wirral coastline. In the South of the UK these habitats are being lost to erosion and coastal squeeze. We also risk losing transitional habitats and associated biodiversity as existing dunes and marshes become stabilised, but early successional habitats are removed rather than being allowed to develop and transition.

Within the HRA and assent there is a justification made that removal of this vegetation will not have a net negative impact on the SSSI condition as the level of sediment accretion and salt marsh establishment each year is enough to offset. This is of course very short sighted given what we know about the status of this type of habitat regionally and nationally. If we are to achieve our 30 by 30 goals then we should be supporting the net gain of these rare and unique habitats, rather than settling for “no net loss” as stated in the HRA.

Salt marsh and sand dune succession is an opportunity, not a threat. Dunes create areas of clean, profiled amenity beach for residents and visitors, and attract an abundance of wildlife. They are a natural filter for the sea, trapping waste from the land and flotsam from the sea. They reduce wind blown sand, protecting private property and drain systems. They can be engineered and shaped to our needs.

The development of this area of salt meadow and embryonic sand dune is also critical for the natterjack toad population along the coast at Red Rocks and Hoylake. This is the last remaining population of this nationally declining species in Cheshire. We need to encourage expansion of habitat available to them by opening up a corridor in order for the population to be sustainable in the long term.

Current systems and processes for assessment of this work have been followed appropriately in this case. However, we should question whether these processes remain fit for purpose. Assessing units or areas in isolation from one another does not tell us the full story. We should be considering the full extent of these nationally rare habitats when making decisions about their management. Though there is always a compromise between the needs of humans and wildlife to be considered we should be weighting these decisions towards allowing and protecting the restoration of lost natural habitats and processes. We should always be working towards finding “win-win” outcomes for humans and wildlife, over the maintenance of artificially created and traditionally “aesthetic” landscapes. Saltmarsh habitats have declined by over 85% nationally since 1890, as highly efficient carbon sequestration systems hosting a unique abundance of biodiversity, we are blessed to see these systems naturally expanding on our northwest coastlines. In the face of both a climate and biodiversity emergency we cannot afford to ignore this opportunity to do better.