Department for Energy Security & Net Zero | Marine Management Organisation | Offshore Petroleum Regulator for Environment & Decommissioning | Department for Environment Food & Rural Affairs

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SAC Underwater Noise Management Working Group:

Annual Progress Report 2025

Revision History

Version	Date	Stage / Action	Notes / Changes Made
Draft 1	11 November2025	Initial draft created	First version prepared
Draft 2	March/April 2026	Reviewed by working group	Comments received
Draft 3	May 2026	Amendments made	Updated based on feedback
Final	14 May 2026	Approved	Ready for release

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1.0 Introduction

The Special Area of Conservation (SAC) Underwater Noise Management Working Group (hereafter referred to as "the Group") provides a forum to share information and coordinate the management of impulsive noise from offshore energy development.

The Group's work focuses on five harbour porpoise SACs: the Southern North Sea (SNS), North Anglesey Marine, Bristol Channel Approaches, North Channel, and West Wales Marine.

These sites were designated in 2019 under the Conservation of Habitats and Species Regulations 2017 to protect key habitats for harbour porpoise. In 2020, the Joint Nature Conservation Committee (JNCC), Natural England (NE) and Department for Agriculture, Environment and Rural Affairs (DAERA), published guidance on noise management in harbour porpoise SACs. This guidance introduced area-time disturbance thresholds, under which a plan or project, either individually or in combination, is considered to result in significant disturbance if it excludes harbour porpoises from more than:

- **20% of the relevant area of the site in any given day, or**
- **an average of 10% of the relevant area of the site over a season.**

For management purposes, seasons are defined as:

- **Summer season:** 1 April – 30 September
- **Winter season:** 1 October – 31 March

The management of activities in line with these thresholds is a key function of the Group. The Group meets on a monthly basis and brings together representatives from the Marine Management Organisation (MMO), the Offshore Petroleum Regulator for Environment and Decommissioning (OPRED), the Ministry of Defence (MoD), Natural Resources Wales (NRW), the Department for Environment, Food and Rural Affairs (Defra), the Department for Energy Security and Net Zero (DESNZ), Scottish Government Marine Directorate (SGMD) and the Department of Agriculture, Environment and Rural Affairs (DAERA). In 2025, the group also welcomed participation from the Isle of Man Department of Environment, Food and Agriculture (DEFA).

In addition to the monthly meetings, quarterly engagement is undertaken with Statutory Nature Conservation Bodies (SNCBs) to ensure alignment and consistency in underwater noise management approaches across organisations.

This report outlines the work undertaken by the Group during the calendar year 2025.

2.0 Regulator-Led Noise Management

2.1 SNS SAC Noise Tracker

Effective underwater noise management relies on robust and timely data collection. MMO and OPRED jointly maintain a centralised Excel-based database, known as the SNS SAC Noise Tracker, to record impulsive noise-generating activities within, or affecting, the SNS SAC.

The tracker is used to monitor project schedules, manage potential overlaps in activity, assess daily disturbance against thresholds, and provide a record of cumulative disturbance for seasonal reporting.

In 2025, the tracker underwent a significant redesign to improve functionality and usability. Previously, MMO and OPRED operated separate internal systems, which were cross-referenced weekly. These systems have now been merged into a single shared platform. Tracker outputs are published weekly via OPRED's SNS Activity Tracker increasing transparency across stakeholders.

Data is typically entered by regulatory case teams as licence applications are submitted, or where there is prior awareness of planned works.

2.2 Call for Information and Pre-Season Predictions

Building on the data captured within the SNS SAC Noise Tracker, regulators carry out additional forward planning to understand future offshore operations, using a Call for Information (CFI) to gather early information.

In August 2024, regulators issued a CFI to offshore developers and operators to collect information on planned works for the Summer 2025 season. The request was circulated directly to known developers and further supported by industry bodies, including Renewable UK (RUK) and Offshore Energies UK (OEUK), to ensure comprehensive coverage.

The CFI requested details of any impulsive noise-generating activities taking place within, or likely to impact, the SNS SAC.

Following the closure of the CFI, MMO compiled the submitted data to produce pre-season disturbance predictions. As developers are often uncertain of final schedules at this stage, submissions typically include worst-case assumptions.

For the Summer 2025 season, the worst-case predictions are shown in Table 1.

*Table 1: **Worst-case pre-season predictions** for the **Summer 2025** season (1 April 2025 – 30 September 2025), showing the maximum daily disturbance and seasonal average disturbance as the percentage area of the SNS SAC predicted to be affected by impulsive noise from offshore activities.*

Disturbance Type	Percentage area predicted to be disturbed (%)
Maximum daily	30.8
Seasonal average	14.98

These predictions assume high-intensity scenarios, including high-order unexploded ordnance (UXO) clearance, unabated piling, and continuous activity across full licence periods. In practice, actual impacts are typically lower due to mitigation measures (such as noise abatement) and shorter activity durations. However, the worst-case scenario provides a conservative baseline to support planning and ensure protection of site integrity under maximum activity assumptions.

As part of a further CFI circulated in August 2025, regulators also requested data relating to planned activities during the Winter 2025/26 season. Although formal noise management during winter has not historically been required, increasing levels of activity in the SNS meant it was important to confirm whether management would be necessary. Based on the information received, the worst-case disturbance is shown in Table 2.

*Table 2: **Worst-case pre-season predictions** for the **Winter 2025/2026** season (1 October 2025 – 31 March 2026), showing the maximum daily disturbance and seasonal average disturbance as the percentage area of the SNS SAC predicted to be affected by impulsive noise from offshore activities.*

Disturbance Type	Percentage area predicted to be disturbed (%)
Maximum daily	12.1
Seasonal average	3.32

As these values are significantly below the established thresholds noted in section 1.0, regulators concluded that management processes would not be required for Winter 2025/26.

2.3 Development Co-ordination Forum

As the worst-case predictions for the Summer 2025 season exceeded both the daily and seasonal disturbance thresholds, the implementation of management strategies was considered necessary.

The Development Coordination Forum (DCF) has been used by regulators as an underwater noise management mechanism since 2023. The forum brings together regulators (MMO and OPRED), government departments (DEFRA and DESNZ), and offshore developers and operators to coordinate activities and manage noise disturbance levels within the SNS SAC during periods of high activity, particularly the summer season.

In preparation for the Summer 2025 season, three pre-season DCF meetings were held in November 2024, January 2025, and March 2025. The purpose of these meetings was to identify potential pinch points and discuss any challenges where industry may require additional support. The initial meeting was hosted in person by OEUK, while the subsequent meetings were held virtually. A mid-season meeting also took place in June 2025.

While the DCF provides a strategic overview of activity across the season, more detailed and responsive management of daily noise disturbance is achieved through the Simultaneous Operations (SIMOPs) meetings.

2.4 Simultaneous Operations Calls

SIMOPs meetings were held twice weekly (Tuesdays and Fridays) throughout the Summer 2025 season. These calls were used to manage disturbance and ensure activities remained within underwater noise thresholds by collecting 7-day retrospective and forward-looking schedules, along with associated noise disturbance data, from offshore developers and operators active during this period.

The meetings were chaired and managed by a SIMOPs Coordinator. Regulators did not attend these meetings but provided support to the SIMOPs Coordinator where required.

In previous years, offshore developers have undertaken the SIMOPs Coordinator role on a voluntary basis. However, in 2025 a pilot project was introduced to trial an independent SIMOPs Coordinator. This role was delivered by colleagues from EvolvEnergies and funded by Renewable UK (RUK) through the Offshore Wind Industry Council (OWIC).

Pinch points occurred throughout the season where activity levels within the SNS SAC were high. However, the coordination efforts of all parties ensured that disturbance thresholds were not exceeded.

Regulators would like to thank all developers and operators involved in the Summer 2025 DCF and SIMOPs processes for their collaboration, timely provision of information, and commitment to coordinating activities effectively. Additional thanks are extended to the SIMOPs Coordinators at EvolvEnergies, who ensured meetings ran smoothly and that information was shared efficiently.

The pilot of the independent SIMOPs Coordinator role is considered to have been a significant success. Regulators would also like to thank OWIC for supporting this initiative. Funding has since been secured through OWIC and OEUK to continue the SIMOPs Coordinator role for the Summer 2026 season.

2.5 SNS SAC Threshold Compliance (Summer 2025)

The coordinated approach implemented through the DCF and SIMOPs processes was effective in managing underwater noise throughout the Summer 2025 season.

As a result of these efforts, the maximum recorded daily disturbance was 18.26% (Table 3, Figure 1), while the seasonal average disturbance was reduced to 2.01% (Table 3, Figure 2). Both values remained well within the established thresholds, meaning no breaches occurred during the 2025 summer season.

*Table 3: **Confirmed impact data** for the **Summer 2025 season** (1 April 2025 – 30 September 2025), showing the maximum daily disturbance and seasonal average disturbance as the percentage area of the SNS SAC affected by impulsive noise from offshore activities.*

Disturbance Type	**Percentage area predicted to be disturbed (%)**
Maximum daily	18.26
Seasonal average	2.01

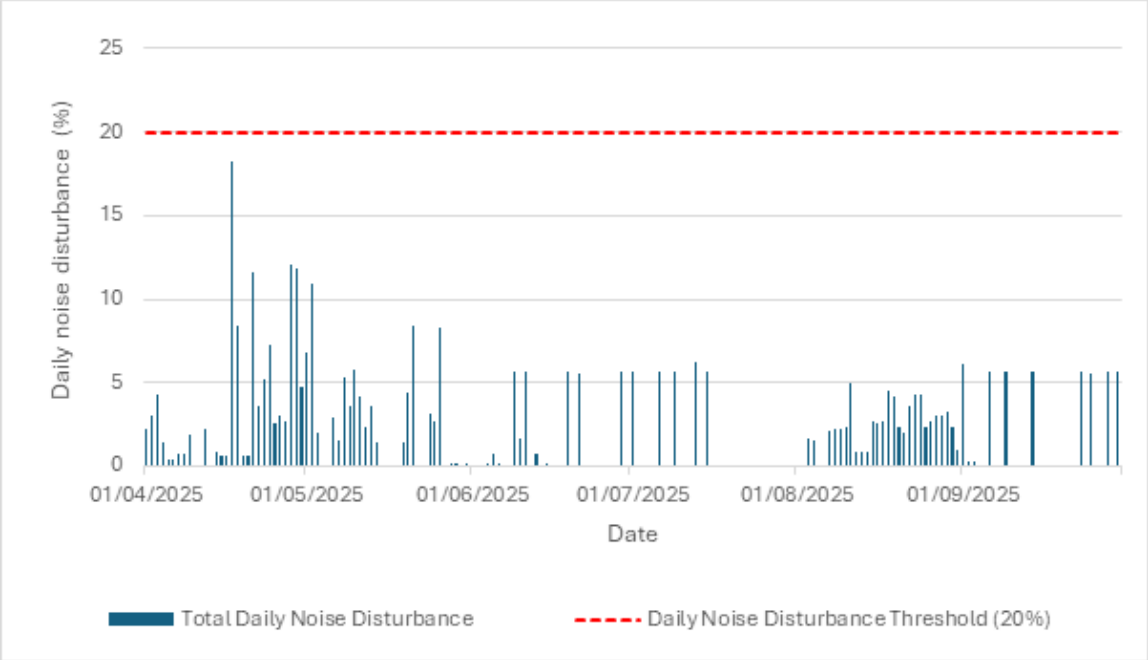

Figure 1. ***Confirmed highest daily*** *percentage area of the SNS SAC disturbed by impulsive noise from offshore activities in* ***Summer 2025*** *(1 April 2025 – 30 September 2025).*

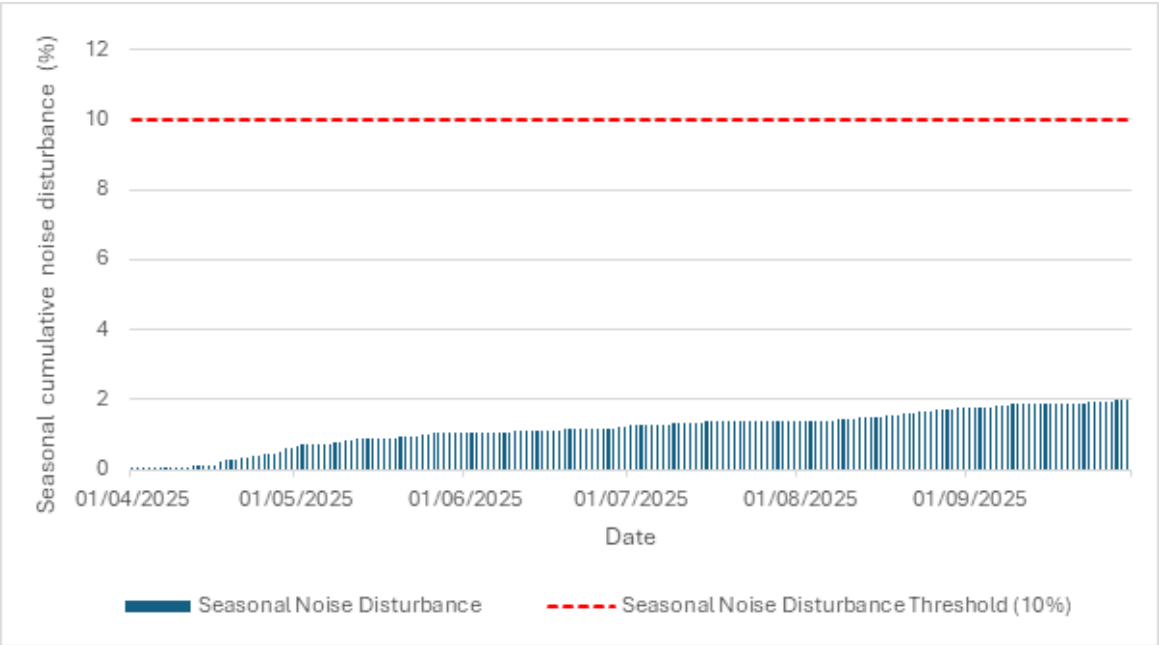

Figure 2. ***Confirmed cumulative seasonal*** *percentage area of the SNS SAC disturbed by impulsive noise from offshore activities in* ***Summer 2025*** *(1 April 2025 – 30 September 2025).*

Analysis of activity types showed that geophysical surveys were the largest contributor to seasonal disturbance, followed by abated monopiling and unabated monopiling

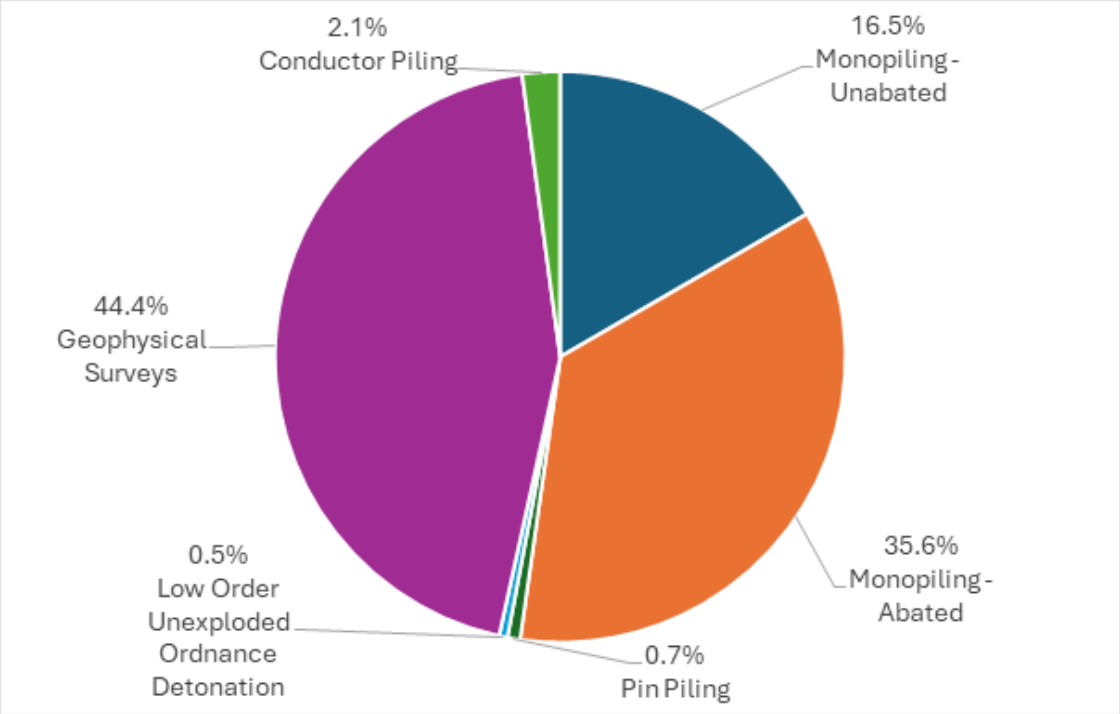

*Figure 3: The contribution of different impulsive noise generating activities to seasonal disturbance in the SNS SAC in **Summer 2025** (1 April 2025 – 30 September 2025).*

2.6 Dispute Resolution Process (DRP)

In May 2025, the Underwater Noise Conflict Resolution Framework Report was published. The work was undertaken by Xodus on behalf of the OWIC Pathways to Growth (P2G) workstream. The aim of the study was to identify improved approaches to coordination and conflict resolution in relation to underwater noise threshold management within the SNS SAC.

The study recommended the development and implementation of an agreed conflict escalation framework, to be used as a last-resort process in circumstances where developers and operators are unable to reschedule activities within the SIMOPs process to avoid a potential threshold breach.

During the second half of 2025, MMO, OPRED, DESNZ and DEFRA worked collaboratively to develop the Dispute Resolution Process (DRP), with the intention of implementing it for the Summer 2026 season. The DRP was finalised in January 2026, and a Rehearsal of Concept (RoC) was undertaken in February 2026 to test the process.

As this work was completed in 2026, further detail on the DRP and outcomes from the RoC exercise will be provided in the 2026 Annual Progress Report.

3.0 SNCB-Led Noise Management

3.1 Marine Noise Registry (MNR)

Phase 4 project work is underway and is building on previous development phases, to continue to improve the user experience and ensure the MNR is collating all the necessary data. The aim is that this work will complement the Piloting of Offshore Wind Environmental Mitigation (POWEM) pilot piling noise limit project by developing a new MNR section for data collection associated with any possible future piling noise limit that may be introduced.

3.2 Effective Deterrent Range (EDR) Revisions

In September 2025, the JNCC published updated guidance on the Effective Deterrent Ranges (EDRs) to be used to calculate area impacted by noisy activities in harbour porpoise SACs. The guidance can be found here.

4.0 International Coordination and Engagement

4.1 OSPAR Regional Action Plan (RAP)

According to OSPAR Common Indicator assessments, to date the most prevalent source of impulsive noise pollution in the OSPAR Maritime Area is seismic airgun surveys. Action 4 of the Regional Action Plan will define a noise reduction target for seismic airgun surveys by 2027, in consultation with relevant stakeholders. In addition, the aim is to develop OSPAR recommendations for Best Available Techniques (BAT) and Best Environmental Practice (BEP) in relation to seismic airgun surveys and for geophysical surveys, including for higher frequency sources. The UK is leading on Action 4 with support from EnerGeo Alliance and Denmark.

4.2 Management of Ocean Noise by Multinational Energy Regulators (MONMER) Update

Hosted by the Bureau of Ocean Energy Management (BOEM), the annual general meeting was held on the 19th, 20th and 27th May and the 3rd of June 2025. Regulatory updates were given from participating countries on noise policy, regulation, assessment and potential noise management challenges. The UK presented on the Marine Noise Policy Paper and managing noise from multiple industries in marine protected areas. There was also the opportunity to discuss research gaps, engaging industry and emerging industries which may have noise management implications.

5.0 Conclusion

This report outlines the ongoing efforts and advancements in the work of the Group, particularly in relation to the Development Co-ordination Forum and noise management within the Southern North Sea SAC. It also highlights SNCB-led noise management, progress on the Marine Noise Registry (MNR) and the introduction of new data collection to support the development of potential piling noise limits.

The update to Effective Deterrent Ranges demonstrates a commitment to refining methodologies for assessing the impact of noisy activities on sensitive marine areas. Internationally, the UK's involvement in OSPAR and MONMER initiatives reflects a proactive approach, fostering collaboration among regulators.

Continued engagement with industry and stakeholders, alongside shared learning at both national and international levels, is vital to further enhance noise management and ensure the protection the marine environment.