

**Resolution CM/ResDip(2008)1
on the revised regulations for the European Diploma for Protected Areas**

*(Adopted by the Committee of Ministers on 20 February 2008
at the 1018th meeting of the Ministers' Deputies)¹*

Appendix 5: Model plan for annual reports

Annual report for the year 2023

Annual reports should describe the changes that have taken place since the previous year in dynamic terms of management and function and not be limited to basic data. Any new text or map introducing a change in the situation of the area should be attached to the annual report.

State: United Kingdom

Name of the area: Fair Isle National Scenic Area

Year and number of years since the award or renewal of the European Diploma for Protected Areas:

Report year: 2023 Number of years since renewal: 3

Central authority concerned:

Name:

Address:

Tel:

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www:

Authority responsible for its management:

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¹ As amended by Resolution CM/ResDip(2014)2 on 2 July 2014 at the 1204th meeting of the Ministers' Deputies.
Internet : <http://www.coe.int/cm>

1. Conditions: List here all conditions which were attached to the award or the renewal of the European Diploma. Explain either how the conditions have been totally complied with or detail the progress in complying with the conditions. Please also indicate any unresolved difficulties that you have encountered.

1. by 2022, review the 2010-2019 management plan, as was foreseen in 2018, and elaborate a new management plan to secure the continuous development and management of the Fair Isle Scenic Area;
2. consider, in the above-mentioned management plan, the conditions and recommendations of the appraisal report and include specific provisions dedicated to climate change and how to address this issue in relation to the long-term conservation of endemic species and species of birds;
3. make more extensive use of the European Diploma logo in all information material and brochures and explain the relevance of the diploma wherever useful;

1.1 A new draft management plan was circulated to the island for comment by the National Trust for Scotland (NTS) in March 2023 and was formally approved by NTS in June. It marks a shift in direction in line with the recent adoption of new strategic goals at national level centred on conservation, engagement and sustainability. The new Fair Isle management plan therefore emphasises partnership working, with isle-based community organisations and other stakeholders leading on delivery in areas that do not fall directly under the three pillars of activity agreed by the NTS Board of Trustees. NTS will continue to fulfil its duties as a landlord with regards to existing properties, the operation of the aerodrome, the protection of sites and practices of archaeological and cultural importance and any large-scale infrastructure development that requires them to be a lead partner, but will look to other organisations to lead on the delivery of other projects, such as new housing, transport and power generation. Conservation outcomes and objectives form a key part of the document, to be achieved through a mix of direct action, partnering with other relevant organisations and the provision of financial support. Crofting is seen as a key mechanism for continuing to deliver land management goals and the Trust plans to work with the local crofting community to ensure the current land tenure arrangements continue to support this way of life and to better understand how crofting can contribute effectively to habitat management on the island. NTS will also work directly on the issue of biosecurity and invasive species as a key partner with the Biosecurity for Life project, with a view to moving towards greater government responsibility in this area as the project matures. Research and monitoring of marine and terrestrial wildlife will largely be achieved through work undertaken by Fair Isle Bird Observatory, Fair Isle Marine Research Organisation (FIMRO) and the Demonstration and Research Marine Protected Area (DR MPA). Nevertheless, NTS are currently and will continue to be a key source of funding for marine research projects delivered through the MPA in particular, in addition to active participation in research strategy development in their role as a member of the marine protected area Steering Committee. Furthermore, NTS are committed to an advocacy role at national level, where research and monitoring information can be used to inform policy development. A significant input into the design and implementation of a new interpretation strategy for the island has also been identified as a priority for the Trust.

1.2 The new management plan acknowledges the threat that climate change poses to Fair Isle's wildlife, particularly its seabird populations, in addition to the impacts on coastal archaeology and island infrastructure, including impacts on the operation of its transport services. NTS therefore commits to lead on a climate vulnerability assessment for Fair Isle early in the term of this management plan giving time to plan the implementation of any mitigation measures identified.

1.3 The current limited visibility of the European Diploma award around the island and its importance to the island population is acknowledged within the 2023-2033 management plan. In consequence the Trust commits to continue its support of the island community to ensure the award is retained in the future. An internal review will also be undertaken to better understand how the award can be used to further the conservation aims of the Trust with regards to Fair Isle.

2. Recommendations: List here all recommendations which were attached to the award or the renewal of the European Diploma. Explain either how the recommendations have been totally complied with or detail the progress in complying with the recommendations. Please also indicate any unresolved difficulties that you have encountered.

1. consider a ban on fishing and catching of lobsters within the marine protected area or at least in a scientifically defined area;
2. consider the inclusion of the marine protected area into the European Diploma site;

3. enhance the housing-related quality of life through appropriate measures, mainly concerning renovation and restoration; take into consideration the peculiar conditions of local businesses and improve working conditions through the installation of appropriate manufacturing locations;
4. give the European Diploma a prominent place at the entrance of or inside the new bird observatory.

2.1 At present the community view is a preference for retaining the ability to catch lobster and crab species in Fair Isle waters for personal consumption. Future shellfish monitoring and research, including V-notching is currently dependent on a local resident obtaining a commercial license from the Shetland Shellfish Management Organisation (SSMO), the body which oversees licensing within Shetland waters. Discussions between the DR MPA project officer and SSMO on this subject are ongoing and remain a high priority for FIMRO, reflecting the community desire for sustainable management of the fishery. In addition, a review of the DR MPA research priorities in early 2024 is likely to reinforce the importance of undertaking further research into lobster *Homarus Gammarus* and brown crab *Cancer pagurus* population size, potentially in collaboration with other organisations such as the University of the Highlands and Islands.

2.2 Currently the intention is not to include the marine protected area within the European Diploma site. The NTS management plan identifies the marine protected area Steering Committee as the main route for delivering conservation and research and monitoring objectives for marine wildlife. This will remain under review and it may well prove useful to have discussions with the Council of Europe representative at the next site review as to the additional benefits that inclusion within the Diploma outside of this management structure may bring

2.3 With specific regard to housing the National Trust for Scotland management plan for 2023 onwards commits to continued upkeep of existing inhabited properties but underlines that it will not take on the construction of new housing, as such action would fall outside its organisational objectives. NTS also note that funding is now more accessible to community bodies than it is to larger organisations. Projects led by the community are therefore more likely to successfully attract the funding required.

There was some delay to the completion of the housing condition survey conducted in 2022 and it is therefore anticipated that an action plan for works needed will not be in place until spring 2024 at the earliest. A review of current rental agreements is also planned over this period, both to standardize rental agreements and to implement increases in rent, which have remained broadly static for some years. Initial discussions have taken place with the Fair Isle Development Company and the National Trust for Scotland to explore potential options for a route to new housing on the island and the NTS vision for how this would be developed. A new housing survey of island residents has recently been completed to obtain up to date information on housing need and to determine whether there is a mandate from its members for Fair Isle Development Company to play a role in delivering housing and if so, what form this may take. It is anticipated that in early 2024 the current review and restructure of Fair Isle Development Company will have been completed and an action plan setting out its strategic objectives approved. If new housing forms part of this plan then the Fair Isle Development Manager would be tasked with taking the project forward and securing funding, with support provided by NTS.

2.4 Fair Isle Bird Observatory continues to experience delays in the construction of the new building. Project completion is now not anticipated until later in 2024. Conversations regarding the placement of Council of Europe Diploma information in the Observatory are unlikely to take place until such a point in 2024 as the building is close to completion.

3. Site Management: List here any changes to the European Diploma holding site management, in relation to both terrestrial and aquatic environments (as appropriate), and in relation to staff and finances, since the last annual report was submitted to the Council of Europe. Please also indicate any unresolved difficulties that you have encountered.

The DR MPA Project Officer moved on to a new role in the spring of 2023, with a new project officer, Katie Cubbon, starting work in August. Agreement was reached with funders to extend the duration of project funding for the post to June 2024 to take account of this short hiatus.

Productive discussions were also held with NTS regarding the funding of research projects within the current financial year and the available research budget for 2024. The annual Fair Isle inshore fish survey, which was funded through the 2023 research funding package, was delivered as anticipated. Other projects were variously delayed, leading to a substantial underspend on the agreed budget. Arrangements have been made to bring spending on the benthic modelling project forward to incorporate it fully within the financial year, as the project is significantly advanced. A poor breeding season meant the shag *Gulosus aristotelis* tagging

project could not go ahead as planned, and this has been rescheduled for summer 2024. Supply issues also stopped the cetacean acoustic monitoring project from going ahead, but discussions with the Marine Directorate suggest that progress could be made in deploying recording instruments in 2024.

An OpenReach project to install high-speed fibre optic cable around the island was undertaken in autumn 2023, including some areas of qualifying habitat within the Specially Protected Area in the north of island. Habitat restoration was completed under the supervision of an Ecological Clerk of Works where required.

Whilst significant progress has been made through the year, construction work will continue at the Fair Isle Bird Observatory site into 2024.

4. Boundaries: Give details of any changes to the boundaries of the European Diploma holding site since the last annual report was submitted to the Council of Europe. If there are any changes, please attach an appropriate map to this report. Please also indicate any unresolved difficulties that you have encountered.

No changes to the boundaries of the Fair Isle National Scenic Area have been made.

5. Other information: List here any other information about the European Diploma holding site which you consider should be provided to the Council of Europe.

No additional information provided

The following sections of the form should only be filled in if your area is in the year before a renewal of its European Diploma for Protected Areas, i.e. year 4 after the award of the European Diploma or year 9 after its renewal.

6. Natural heritage (general abiotic description: geomorphology, geology and hydrogeology, habitats, flora, fauna, landscape) – State of conservation

6.1. Environment: changes or deterioration in the environment, of natural or anthropic origin, accidental or permanent, actual or anticipated

Land between the Observatory and North Haven was used for temporary storage and siting of workforce accommodation pods in 2023. Some areas previously used but now uncovered have shown short-term yellowing of vegetation. No areas of qualifying habitat under the Special Protection Area (SPA) were used. Fibre-optic cable was installed in shallow trenches across the island in autumn 2023, including within the SPA. Habitat restoration along these trenches was completed following installation.

Above average sea surface temperatures were recorded in the northern and eastern sections of the North Sea in June 2023. Temperature increases in Fair Isle waters was not as severe as further south but it emphasizes the need for long-term monitoring to track the impacts of marine warming.

6.2. Flora and vegetation: changes in the plant population and in the vegetational cover; presumed causes

Creeping thistle *Cirsium arvense* abundance and distribution significantly increased in the area around North Haven, particularly on disturbed ground. Early and northern marsh-orchid *Dactylorhiza incarnata* and *D. purpurella* counts at Shirva showed a significant increase in abundance compared to 2022 linked to ongoing sympathetic grazing management. Five species of fungi, including *Coriolus versicolor*, *Enteridium lycoperdon*, *Hypomyces aurantius*, *Polyporus leptoccephalus* and *Ustilago kueneriana* were first records for the isle.

6.3. Fauna: changes in the sedentary or migratory populations; congregating, egg-laying and breeding grounds

Great skua *Stercorarius skua* numbers decreased by over 70% in 2023 compared to 2022, though gannet *Morus bassanus* breeding numbers were only slightly down on 2022. This was in addition to the severe impact of avian flu on both species in 2022. Great skuas naturally show marked fluctuations in breeding so recovery may be possible, particularly as breeding productivity was the highest since 2017. Gannets also showed an improved breeding performance compared to 2022. Other seabird species had a very poor breeding year linked to a lack of food particularly large sandeels, with kittiwakes *Rissa tridactyla* recording zero productivity in monitoring plots for the first year since 2013.

Swallows *Hirundo rustica* produced several broods and blackbirds *Turdus merula* were present at several locations during the summer. A Robin *Erithacus rubecula* carrying food likely represents a second breeding record for the Isle. It was a successful breeding season for a number of wader species, but the tiny red-necked phalarope *Phalaropus lobatus* breeding population present from 2017-2021 has disappeared. FIBO were unable to confirm whether monitoring of 'Fair Isle wren' *Troglodytes troglodytes fridarensis* was undertaken. The migration seasons were often slow, with comparatively few 'falls' of birds noted.

Favourable weather systems in the summer and early autumn were very productive for migrant moths. First records for Fair Isle included vestal *Rhodometra sacraia*, willow beauty *Peribatodes rhomboidaria*, scarce silver-Y *Syngrapha interrogationis*, small magpie *Anania hortulata* and white-line dart *Euxoa tritici*. *Ophion splendens*, a large ichneumonid, was another new species for Fair Isle.

Cetacean sightings included higher than usual numbers of white-beaked dolphin *Lagenorhynchus albirostris*, An aggregation of over 40 were recorded feeding alongside a remarkable 30 minke whale *Baleaenoptera acutorostrata* and one humpback whale *Megaptera novaeangliae* on 30th September. A number of killer whales *Orcinus orca* were recorded through the year, several identified and confirmed as regular visitors. It was also a very good year for flapper skate *Dipterus intermedius* sightings with 4 adults washed up dead early in the winter, two adults caught and released in July and three egg cases found. A male Atlantic halibut *Hipoglossus hipoglossus* caught and released in June was the first to be caught in Fair Isle waters for nearly 50 years. The first barrel jellyfish *Rhizostoma pulmo* and second masked crab *Corystes cassivelaunus* records for Fair Isle were found on the tideline in early spring. A number of *Aequorea* jellies were washed up during the year, along with further barrel jellyfish, a sign of range increase further into the North Sea for these species. Grey seal *Halichoerus grypus* pupping numbers appeared to be stable, though monitoring was limited.

7. Cultural heritage and socio-economic context

- 7.1. Cultural heritage
- 7.1.1. Changes concerning cultural heritage

The Fair Isle Kirk project received funding for an options appraisal survey and building condition in late 2023.

- 7.2. Socio-economic context
- 7.2.1. Changes concerning the socio-economic context

Limited nursing cover following the departure of the resident nurse had some impact on the provision of care and the dispensing of medication. A new resident nurse is expected to start in early 2024. Two key vacant posts on the Good Shepherd ferry have been filled and several isle residents recruited to the fire service.

A Development Manager, funded by NTS and Highlands and Islands Enterprise has been appointed by Fair Isle Development Company (FIDC). FIDC and the Fair Isle Community Association are reforming their constitutional documents to improve interactions between various community bodies and improve community consultation and representation. FIDC is also assessing priorities for the Development Manager and re-engaging with the question of housing provision following the publication of the NTS management plan.

The installation of high-speed fibre-optic cable around the island will substantially improve communication access for some properties, support diversification of employment through remote working, improve delivery of some public services and future-proof internet provision for the island.

8. Education and scientific interest

- 8.1. Visitors – Information policy
 - 8.1.1. Arrangements for receiving and informing the public (building, booklets, maps, cards, etc.)
 - 8.1.2. Frequentation by visitors and behavior (number, distribution in time and space)
 - 8.1.3. Special visits (distinguished persons, groups, etc.)
- 8.2. Scientific research
 - 8.2.1. Current or completed research (observation, experimentation, etc.; identification or inventory of the species listed in the appendices to the Bern Convention, etc.)
 - 8.2.2. Scientific publications

9. Site description (vulnerability, protection status, ownership, documentation)

- 9.1. Changes in legislation or regulations
- 9.2. Changes in ownership title (conversion to public property, rentals, etc.)
- 9.3. Extension or transfer, new uses (for example, conversion into total reserve)

10. Site management (management plans, budget and personnel)

- 10.1. Improvements made
 - 10.1.1. Ecological action affecting the flora and biotopes; controls of fauna
 - 10.1.2. Protection against the elements (fire, water regime)
 - 10.1.3. Approaches and thoroughfares (paths, roads, car parks, signposting, fencing, etc.)
 - 10.1.4. Field equipment (hides and study facilities)
 - 10.1.5. Waste management
 - 10.1.6. Use of renewable energy systems
- 10.2. Management
 - 10.2.1. Administrative department: changes made
 - 10.2.2. Wardens' department: changes made
 - 10.2.3. Internal policing measures
 - 10.2.4. Infringement of regulations and damage; legal action

11. Influence of the award of the European Diploma for Protected Areas

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