

# Favourable Conservation Status Definitions

Natural England Technical Information Note

First published June 2021

TIN180

**Natural England Technical Information Note TIN180**

# **Favourable Conservation Status Definitions**

Author: Julie Hanna



June 2021

This report is published by Natural England under the open Government Licence - OGLv3.0 for public sector information. You are encouraged to use, and reuse, information subject to certain conditions. For details of the licence visit [Copyright](#). Natural England photographs are only available for non-commercial purposes. If any other information such as maps or data cannot be used commercially this will be made clear within the report.

ISBN: 978-1-78354-742-5

**© Natural England 2021**

## Project details

This report should be cited as: HANNA, J. 2021. *Favourable Conservation Status Definitions*. Natural England Technical Information Note, TIN180. Natural England, York.

## Author and Natural England Project Manager

Julie Hanna – Project Manager, Defining Favourable Conservation Status Project, Natural England

## Keywords

Favourable conservation status; defining FCS; FCS methodology; nature recovery.

## Further information

This report can be downloaded from the Natural England Access to Evidence Catalogue: <http://publications.naturalengland.org.uk/> . For information on Natural England publications contact the Natural England Enquiry Service on 0300 060 3900 or e-mail [enquiries@naturalengland.org.uk](mailto:enquiries@naturalengland.org.uk).

## Acknowledgements

The author wishes to thank the following people for their support in the production of this document:

- Current and former members of Natural England's Favourable Conservation Status Technical Steering Group.
- Members of the Defining Favourable Conservation Status project team.
- Colleagues from Defra, Amphibian and Reptile Conservation and Bat Conservation Trust who commented on the content.

# Contents

1. Purpose .....	5
2. Introduction .....	6
3. Favourable Conservation Status Definitions .....	7
4. What Favourable Conservation Status Definitions don't do .....	9
5. Achieving Favourable Conservation Status .....	10
6. Using Favourable Conservation Status Definitions .....	11
7. References.....	13

# 1. Purpose

This Technical Information Note has been prepared to inform you about Favourable Conservation Status Definitions. 'Favourable Conservation Status' (FCS) describes the situation in which a habitat or species is thriving throughout its natural range and is expected to continue to thrive in the future. It includes all occurrences of a habitat or species, both those in the wider environment and those in protected sites. By using evidence and the expertise of specialists we can define what FCS looks like for habitat and species and we can use this information to improve the work we do to recover nature.

## 2. Introduction

The concept of 'favourable conservation status' (FCS) has a strong foundation in international wildlife legislation, notably the 1979 Bonn Convention on Migratory species. The UK is a signatory to the Bonn Convention and continues to play an active part in other multilateral environmental fora such as the Convention on the Conservation of European Wildlife and Natural Habitats (the Bern Convention), which is also relevant to the context in which FCS sits.

In 2018 JNCC published a Common Statement on Favourable Conservation Status agreed by the UK Statutory Nature Conservation Bodies. The statement provides a useful summary of the legislative context (at that date) and key principles:

<https://hub.jncc.gov.uk/assets/b9c7f55f-ed9d-4d3c-b484-c21758cec4fe>.

Beyond legal requirements, the concept of achieving FCS is comparable with 'nature recovery'. How we interpret 'thriving' can be subjective, but if a habitat or species is achieving FCS (defined in terms of agreed evidence-based parameters) then it is considered to be thriving. In this sense FCS is a useful general approach to inform habitat and species conservation, especially in the context of restoring naturally functioning ecosystems. Natural England concurs with the UK Statutory Nature Conservation Bodies Common Statement on FCS and sees value in applying the concept of FCS as a long-term ambition to inform nature recovery.

Defining FCS therefore provides both an objective framework approach to describe the minimum threshold of thriving which can be used to inform nature recovery and a pragmatic tool against which impacts on FCS can be assessed in accordance with legal duties. We believe it has the potential to be a unifying ambition to underpin many conservation policies and delivery mechanisms.

### 3. Favourable Conservation Status Definitions

In the 40 years since the Bonn Convention, there have been several attempts to define FCS in legal and ecological terms and it has been discussed extensively in the UK and Europe. Despite this, we have not benefitted from a consistent, coordinated approach to clarify what FCS means in practice in England for a wide range of habitats and species, although we are familiar with FCS as an objective.

Recognising the benefits of a statutory agency developing the concept of FCS to inform and improve operational and regulatory activities, since 2015 Natural England has taken the initiative to develop an approach to define FCS for a suite of habitats and species which is pragmatic and can be used to focus conservation action on the ground. Our programme of work aims to bring greater clarity and consistency to what it means to apply FCS. It also provides a focus for engagement with partner organisations to share thinking and develop products which are useful for a wider range of applications.

In simple terms, FCS Definitions tell us what ‘good’ look like, that is they describe the situation when a habitat or species is thriving. The method developed by Natural England allows us to describe a realistic ambition for a habitat or species, based on ecological evidence. Economic and technical factors, such as availability of finance or practical mechanisms required to achieve FCS, are not considered when defining FCS.

The resulting Definitions describe the **minimum threshold** which we should cross in order to have confidence that a habitat or species is ‘thriving sustainably’, in other words is thriving now and is expected to continue to thrive in the future.

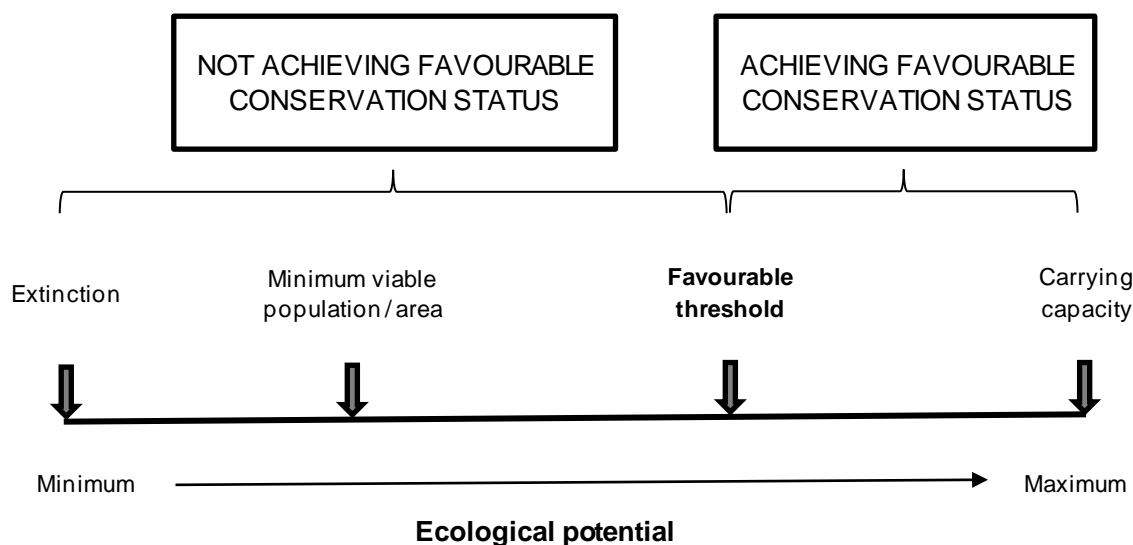


Figure 1. Ecological potential and the favourable conservation status threshold

In practice, the minimum threshold will in many cases be very ambitious to achieve, although it may be a different (potentially lower) standard than the maximum ecological potential that a species or habitat could achieve in England as illustrated in Figure 1.

The methodology developed by Natural England to define FCS for individual habitats and species is available [here](#). We recognise that there is no absolute way to define FCS, so this approach is offered as an attempt to provide a workable framework which can be applied to any habitat or species. We hope that others will find it useful, that the evidence we generate will contribute to thinking about FCS and will provide a basis for shared ambition across the conservation sector. We actively encourage collaboration with and between partner organisations to work on defining FCS for other habitats and species and welcome any enquiries.

The methodology draws on previous work on FCS in the UK and Europe. It requires use of the best available evidence but recognises that the quality of evidence will vary greatly between different habitats and species. To take this into account, the methodology is flexible to cope with data deficiency, and Definitions clearly indicate our level of confidence in the available evidence. Before publication, Definitions go through a rigorous technical review and quality assurance process, to ensure a consistent level of ambition. In most cases this process involves both external and Natural England specialists.

We aim to publish FCS Definitions for a range of habitats and species, most of which are UK priority habitats and species occurring in England or are of European or international importance. Published Definitions are available here:

<http://publications.naturalengland.org.uk/>

Definitions should be updated as new ecological evidence becomes available. Definition metrics should not, however, be changed as the result of factors such as future development – rather Definitions set the level of ambition so that future decisions on development can be clear about their impact on FCS.



## 4. What Favourable Conservation Status Definitions don't do

- Definitions do not set an upper limit for the conservation ambition for habitats and species, but instead the minimum level at which evidence indicates a habitat or species will *thrive sustainably*. Some habitats and species may already be close to or at FCS, but we expect that for others it will take many years to achieve this ambition because restoration of natural functioning of ecosystem processes will be required to some degree.
- The Definitions do not suggest we should return to a pre-industrial condition without human influence. They are pragmatic, recognising two main constraints: existing large urban areas and physical resources that have been irreversibly lost (for example, loss of rock formations through quarrying) but they are ambitious about the improvements needed.
- FCS Definitions do not set targets for delivery but instead describe a *long-term ambition* which can help to inform national and local policies that set delivery targets. Similarly, Definitions do not identify monitoring requirements for habitats or species, but they may be useful to inform the design of monitoring programmes and identify relevant evidence gaps.
- FCS Definitions are not based on future climate scenarios; they are based on current conditions. This means that climate change 'future proofing' (adaptation, mitigation and resilience to change) will need to be considered when determining actions needed to achieve and maintain FCS.

## 5. Achieving Favourable Conservation Status

It is essential for our understanding of what needs to be done for nature recovery and achievement of FCS ambitions that we understand the gap between the current scenario and where we want to get to.

This needs to be evaluated in the context of pressures facing biodiversity, such as on and offshore development, habitat loss and degradation and terrestrial and marine pollution. The gap will need to be filled using various combinations of policy and legal drivers, funding mechanisms and technical or practical measures appropriate to habitats, species and their local circumstances. This emphasises the need for monitoring and regular review coupled with long-term nature recovery plans both nationally and locally which all strive to achieve the ambition of FCS.

The achievement of FCS will ultimately depend on opportunity-led partnership action at a local level to restore natural functioning of ecosystems. It will be essential to secure strong partnership support for FCS outcomes from the start and conservation NGOs will play an important role in this. FCS Definitions should be used to improve our understanding of how local areas or populations can appropriately contribute to the national goal, and should be used alongside many other robust sources of advice and evidence, including:

- [Nature Networks Evidence Handbook](#) (NERR081)
- [Climate Change Adaptation Manual](#) (NE751)
- [Natural Capital Evidence Handbook: to support place-based planning and decision-making](#) (NERR092)
- Evidence being collated and developed to inform the Nature Recovery Network and Local Nature Recovery Strategies.

Where delivery partnerships can be brought together with FCS as a shared ambition, it could help to facilitate a step change in how we collaborate to recover nature. We are working with the Statutory Nature Conservation Bodies in the other parts of the UK to explore how our approach could help inform UK scale work for habitats and species which have a natural range larger than England and to inform our UK reporting duties.

Conservation targets set out in policy such as the Government 25 Year Plan for the Environment (HM Government, 2018) and delivery mechanisms should help to secure environmental improvements which move towards achieving FCS. For many habitats and species, these will need to be supplemented by new approaches in order to achieve and sustain FCS in the long term.

As Definitions are produced, we will cross-check them against our [Conservation Objectives Supplementary Advice for European sites](#), to ensure that the advice we give is compatible with the ambition to achieve FCS. This conservation advice is an important way in which we inform stakeholders how a site can best contribute to achieving FCS.

## 6. Using Favourable Conservation Status Definitions

### Basic principles

- There is a statutory basis for FCS. Achieving FCS is the guiding principle behind the conservation advice which Natural England provides for European Sites.
- Nature recovery is a clear aim of the Government 25 Year Plan for the Environment. FCS Definitions can help us to better understand what this means in practice for individual habitats and species and provide a consistent and transparent basis to support policy and practice applications.
- FCS Definitions provide national ambitions for habitats and species. Knowing this enables decisions to be taken which clearly make appropriate contributions to achieving that goal, rather than just aiming for general improvements. Local decisions can also be made strategically, set in the context of what we need to achieve nationally.
- England level FCS Definitions should be able to assist working at different scales, including informing appropriate local scale contributions to national FCS.

### Applying Favourable Conservation Status

Working with partners we are evaluating how Definitions can inform and improve decision making across a wide range of work areas. We plan in the future to provide geographical breakdowns and additional supporting information to aid local application of Definitions.

#### ➤ Planning and Statutory requirements

- FCS is an underpinning principle of the Conservation of Habitats and Species (Amendment) (EU Exit) Regulations 2019, Environmental Damage (Prevention & Remediation) (England) Regulations 2015 and by extension other legislation such as the Water Environment (Water Framework Directive) (England & Wales) Regulations 2017.
- FCS is key to the Habitats Regulations Assessment (HRA) process which is why we will ensure that FCS Definitions are consistent with our supplementary advice on conservation objectives.
- Definitions are a pragmatic tool against which impacts on FCS can be assessed. They collate and interpret evidence which will be useful for anyone involved in applying the HRA process, for example in Nationally Significant Infrastructure Projects (NSIPs).
- FCS evidence should be used to inform the development of strategic plans in an area to help ensure statutory requirements are treated appropriately. FCS Definitions should also be used in the context of the Environmental Damage (Prevention & Remediation) (England) Regulations 2015 (as amended), to inform assessments of damage which may have a significant adverse effect on reaching or maintaining the FCS of protected species or natural habitats.

➤ **Nature recovery**

- FCS sets the ambition and recognises the need for delivery at larger scales and across both protected and unprotected areas, enabling flexibility to deliver in places and at scales which are relevant to the natural functioning of ecosystems and the services / benefits they provide, without being restricted to particular locations or boundaries.
- Multiple Definitions could be used together in a place to inform the management of individual habitats and species or mosaics comprising several different habitats. They can support objectives to increase cover of some habitats.
- We need to plan now for climate related shifts in habitats and species distribution. FCS Definitions are based upon the current climate scenario, but by their nature they contain a wealth of information which will be relevant to guide forward planning decisions and conservation action in the face of climate change.

➤ **Species**

- FCS Definitions should be used to guide ambitions for Species Recovery Programmes and can be used in conjunction with Species Recovery Curves to help identify when a species can be deemed to have 'recovered'.
- FCS should inform strategic approaches to wildlife management where that is considered appropriate for a species, for example [District Level Licensing for Great Crested Newts](#) and the proposed Species Conservation Strategies. FCS Definitions should help to inform these mechanisms.
- The evidence in Definitions should guide the success criteria for species outcomes resulting from habitat conservation. FCS for species should be integrated into the delivery of FCS for habitats.

➤ **Conservation management of protected sites**

- FCS Definitions could be used to inform the 'sufficiency' of protected sites, in the context of conservation in the wider environment. This could be useful in informing future protected sites designation strategies.
- FCS Definitions should be used to inform site objectives for habitat creation or restoration, determine supporting habitat requirements for species, confirm structure and function requirements for habitats and help to inform future management. This will ensure that protected sites contribute appropriately to achieving FCS.

We are keen to hear feedback about how you have used FCS Definitions. Please email: [favourableconservationstatus@naturalengland.org.uk](mailto:favourableconservationstatus@naturalengland.org.uk)

## 7. References

CRICK, H. Q. P., CROSHER, I. E., MAINSTONE, C. P., TAYLOR, S. D., WHARTON, A., LANGFORD, P., LARWOOD, J., LUSARDI, J., APPLETON, D., BROTHERTON, P. N. M., DUFFIELD, S. J. & MACGREGOR, N. A. 2020. *Nature Networks Evidence Handbook*. Natural England Research Report NERR081. Natural England, York.

HM GOVERNMENT 2018. *A Green Future: Our 25 Year Plan to Improve the Environment*.

JNCC 2018. *Favourable Conservation Status: UK Statutory Nature Conservation Bodies Common Statement*.

MOUSLEY, S. & VAN VLIET, W. 2021. *Defining favourable conservation status in England: Natural England approach*. Natural England Evidence Information Note EIN062. Natural England, York.

NATURAL ENGLAND & RSPB 2019. *Climate Change Adaptation Manual - Evidence to support nature conservation in a changing climate*, 2nd Edition. Natural England, York, UK.

RICE, P. LUSARDI, J. LORD, A. & SUNDERLAND, T. 2021. *Natural Capital Evidence Handbook: to support place-based planning and decision-making*. Natural England Research Report, Number 092.

Natural England is here to secure a healthy natural environment for people to enjoy, where wildlife is protected and England's traditional landscapes are safeguarded for future generations.

Natural England publications are available as accessible pdfs from [www.gov.uk/natural-england](http://www.gov.uk/natural-england).

Should an alternative format of this publication be required, please contact our enquiries line for more information: 0300 060 3900 or email [enquiries@naturalengland.org.uk](mailto:enquiries@naturalengland.org.uk).

ISBN: 978-1-78354-742-5

Catalogue code: TIN180

This publication is published by Natural England under the Open Government Licence v3.0 for public sector information. You are encouraged to use, and reuse, information subject to certain conditions. For details of the licence visit [www.nationalarchives.gov.uk/doc/open-government-licence/version/3](http://www.nationalarchives.gov.uk/doc/open-government-licence/version/3).

Please note: Natural England photographs are only available for non-commercial purposes. For information regarding the use of maps or data visit [www.gov.uk/how-to-access-natural-englands-maps-and-data](http://www.gov.uk/how-to-access-natural-englands-maps-and-data).

© Natural England 2021