

How we did it: Assessing a cross-border seascape

4 September 2015 by Jonathan Tilley ,

Cross-border cooperation is behind background guidance for planning activity across an iconic stretch of coastline.



Cross-channel seascape assessors: Kent County Council coastal officer Chris Drake and landscape officer Ruth Childs

Project: Seascape Character Assessment for the Dover Strait

Organisations involved: Kent County Council, Département du Pas-de-Calais, Land Use Consultants, Kent Downs Area of Outstanding Natural Beauty Unit, Marine Management Organisation, Natural England.

Last month, Kent County Council and the Pas-de-Calais département in northern France launched what they believe to be the first-ever seascape character assessment (SCA) to cross national frontiers.

The Dover Strait SCA is intended for use by councils, national bodies, planners and consultants to assess the impact of any proposed development or new use, whether onshore or offshore, from a marine and coastal perspective. "It's not about stopping development. It's about making sure it's done sustainably, without obliterating the past," says Kent Council coastal officer Chris Drake.

Drake explains that the SCA forms part of the Dover Strait Implementation Plan, a 20-year vision agreed by Kent and Pas-de-Calais last year to recognise, conserve and enhance the area's rich maritime environment and long cultural history. He says the £30,000 bill for the

SCA was fully met by EU Interreg IVC funding for the Network of Straits (NOSTRA) project, launched by Kent and Pas-du-Calais in 2012 to share best practice on spatial planning for strait seascapes across Europe.

The assessment covers the coast from Dungeness to Margate in Kent, from Berck to Dunkirk in France and the marine environment in between. Along the way, the study area takes in parts of the Kent Downs area of outstanding natural beauty, two heritage coasts and the Boulonnais regional natural park.

Based on a combination of fieldwork, analysis and stakeholder consultation, the SCA provides an evidence base describing the study area's attributes and the economic, social and environmental issues involved in managing a complex environment that combines one of the world's busiest shipping lanes and a growing economic hub with a rich natural and cultural heritage.

The county council initially commissioned planning advisers Land Use Consultants (LUC) to produce a pilot assessment in 2012. "This involved exploring the SCA concept and applying it to a small area on the Kent side," says LUC associate Sally Parker. The concept was then applied to the whole strait in a five-stage process.

The first stage established the SCA's purpose and the area it should cover, Parker explains. The next involved desk-based research to collect data and information, followed by field and boat surveys in the summer of 2014. Stakeholder consultations took place last autumn and the final stage was to finalise the classification of seascape character types and areas and present it in a user-friendly format.

Parker says it was a challenge to obtain consistent information for both sides of the strait. "France has different planning designations, so we had to get up to speed on those," she says. Drake says the team's Pas de Calais counterparts were "very supportive" in organising events and identifying organisations that could help with characterisation of the French coast. "That has given us a similar level of detail on both sides of the strait," he says.

In policy terms, the SCA will form part of the evidence base for the South East and South onshore and offshore plans being prepared by the Marine Management Organisation (MMO). The classification, Parker says, are designed to be compatible with the MMO's framework for the South plan, which reached draft options stage this spring.

Its authors also see the SCA being deployed in terrestrial planning. County council landscape officer Ruth Childs says the study helps to "nail down" hard-to-quantify details, such as the features that make a landscape feel beautiful or tranquil. "It means decisions can be informed by a consistent evidence base," she adds.

Drake is discussing with Kent's coastal district and parish councils how the results might influence local and neighbourhood plans. He also sees a role for the SCA in development management, for example by informing the visual impact assessments required under the environmental assessment process – although he says its findings could be equally useful in assessing more modest schemes.

"If people feel comfortable using the SCA for development control, there's no reason why supplementary planning guidance couldn't be based on it," he adds.

More broadly, he says the results are helping the county council to develop strategic priorities to protect its natural and cultural heritage. "The SCA is a very accessible work that can be used in things like tourism guides and promoting the area's identity. It's not just a planning tool – it has an advocacy role."

Parker believes the results will help put seascapes on an equal footing with landscape character assessment. "We hope it will influence planning across Europe, with other areas seeing it as good practice and developing their own SCAs," she says.