Producing Favourable Conservation Status strategies

Natural England's guidance

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Natural England Technical Information Note [TINXXX]

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Contents

1. Purpose of this document

This document provides the background information necessary to understand and produce strategies for delivering Favourable Conservation Status in England. When preparing a strategy, please use the template document provided by Natural England's Defining Favourable Conservation Status team.

2. Introduction to Favourable Conservation Status strategies

2.1 What a Favourable Conservation Status strategy does

Favourable Conservation Status strategies set out Natural England's view of the objectives and actions needed to achieve Favourable Conservation Status (FCS) for species and habitats in England.

FCS is the situation in which a habitat or species is thriving throughout its natural range and is expected to continue to do so in the future. Natural England's Defining FCS project is defining minimum thresholds for FCS in England for a range of species and habitats. FCS definitions are published on the project's Access to Evidence webpage. They describe the long-term ambition for a species or habitat in England, wherever they occur, based on the best available ecological evidence. FCS can also be defined at smaller spatial scales, representing the contribution of a place to national FCS. For simplicity, this document sometimes refers to the focal species and habitats of FCS strategies as 'features'.

FCS strategies provide a link between conservation actions on the ground and national nature recovery ambitions. They are intended to guide the work of conservation practitioners, particularly Natural England Area Teams but also external partners.

FCS strategies are flexible tools that can focus on single or multiple features. There are three types (see Figure 1):

- **Species**: a national strategy for a single species with conservation needs.
- **Habitat**: a national strategy for a habitat, or group of ecologically coherent habitats. For example, a heathland strategy could cover different heathland habitats, including wet and dry heaths. A habitat strategy can also encompass key associated species; in a heathland strategy these could be Dartford warbler (*Curruca undata*) and sand lizard (*Lacerta agilis*).
- **Place-based**: a strategy that brings together multiple definitions in a place to deliver a place's contribution to FCS. The place may contain nationally significant populations of species and areas of habitat. Features that have national strategies

may also be included in place-based strategies. A pilot place-based strategy is being developed at a landscape-scale in Purbeck Heaths National Nature Reserve. The outcomes of this pilot will inform the future development of place-based strategies (see sections 4.2 and 4.3 for more information).

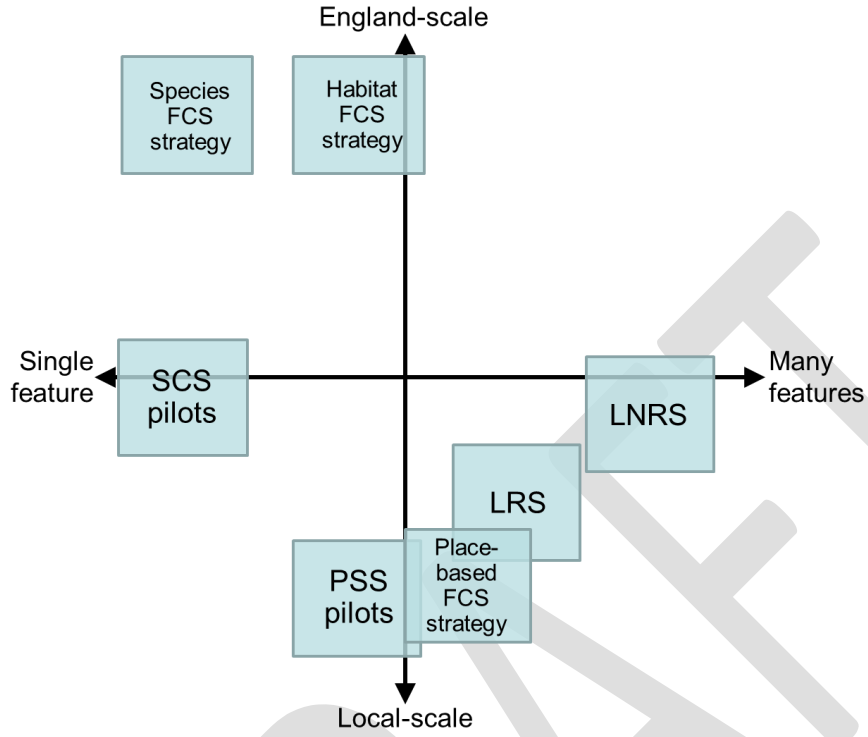

Figure 1. The geographical scale and feature scope of different types of Favourable Conservation Status (FCS) strategy in relation to other Natural England nature recovery tools: Landscape Recovery Scheme (LRS), Local Nature Recovery Strategies (LNRS), Protected Site Strategy pilots (PSS pilots), and Species Conservation Strategy pilots (SCS pilots). Positions are approximate.

2.2 When a Favourable Conservation Status strategy is needed

FCS strategies should add value to existing activities by identifying the ambitious conservation actions needed to achieve FCS and any constraints that need to be overcome. They can be produced where no appropriate conservation strategy or action plan exists or, conversely, they can be adopted as an umbrella to bring together a range of existing strategies and policy mechanisms (Figure 1).

FCS strategies will be produced for features depending on the needs and priorities of Natural England. Strategies can be developed once FCS has been defined for the feature(s) of interest. Developing definitions and strategies in close sequence will help to avoid any discrepancies emerging e.g., due to changes in threats or conservation status over time.

When deciding whether to produce a FCS strategy, Natural England staff should assess the following criteria, using evidence from FCS definitions and other sources.

2.2.1 Species

A species strategy should be considered if the following criteria are met:

- The best available evidence suggests that the focal species is not at FCS.
- It is likely to be challenging or ineffective to integrate the objectives and actions required to achieve FCS within habitat or place-based strategies.

2.2.2 Habitat

A habitat strategy should be considered if the following criteria are met:

- The available evidence suggests that some or all focal features are not at FCS.
- The habitat(s) is/are sufficiently widely distributed across England to necessitate a national opposed to a place-based focus.

2.2.3 Place-based

A place-based strategy should be considered if most of the following criteria are met:

- The available evidence suggests that some or all focal features are not at FCS.
- The place is of a suitable size for the focal features, being able to support naturally or near-naturally functioning habitats and species' populations.
- The place holds, or has the potential to hold, populations of species and areas of habitat important for their national recovery.
- The recovery of the focal features is likely to require contrasting conservation actions, such as restoring different habitats, and thus necessitating an integrated strategy to achieve the place's contribution to FCS.

3. Guiding principles

Principle 1: The overall objective of a FCS strategy is to guide recovery

The overall objective of a strategy is to facilitate the recovery of a feature or set of features to a situation where they are thriving. A strategy should be an informative and practical guide that outlines the objectives and priority actions required to achieve FCS.

Principle 2: A strategy translates national ambition(s) into place-based actions

The Defining FCS project is defining FCS at the scale of England, representing the national ambition for a focal feature. A strategy evaluates the potential contribution of a place or multiple places to national FCS and the conservation objectives and actions in those places required to deliver this contribution (Figure 2). A strategy may also include national-level actions e.g., legal protection.

Principle 3: A strategy works within a defined timeframe

FCS strategies are time-limited to enable progress towards FCS to be monitored and iterative refinement following periodic review. A medium-term timeframe (e.g., 25 years) is chosen that is appropriate to the conservation needs and recovery of the focal species, habitat(s), or place. Short-term milestones (e.g., 6 years, matching the period of statutory reporting) should be used to monitor progress towards FCS.

Principle 4: A strategy should be ambitious, where required, but FCS may not be achievable within its timeframe

A FCS strategy outlines the actions needed to achieve FCS, which will often need to be ambitious, and identifies constraints to achieving FCS within its defined timeframe. If FCS is not considered achievable within the strategy's timeframe, time-specific objectives are set towards achieving FCS.

Principle 5: A strategy considers more than ecology

FCS is defined purely in ecological terms. However, when considering how to achieve FCS, social, economic, and political factors must be considered. For example, a lack of budget or appropriate delivery tools could constrain progress towards FCS, as could persistent threats such as climate change.

Principle 6: Where appropriate, a strategy should consider the definitions of multiple features

A FCS strategy should aim to maximise synergies and minimise conflicts between species and habitats. Where possible and appropriate, a strategy should integrate FCS definitions from more than one habitat or species.

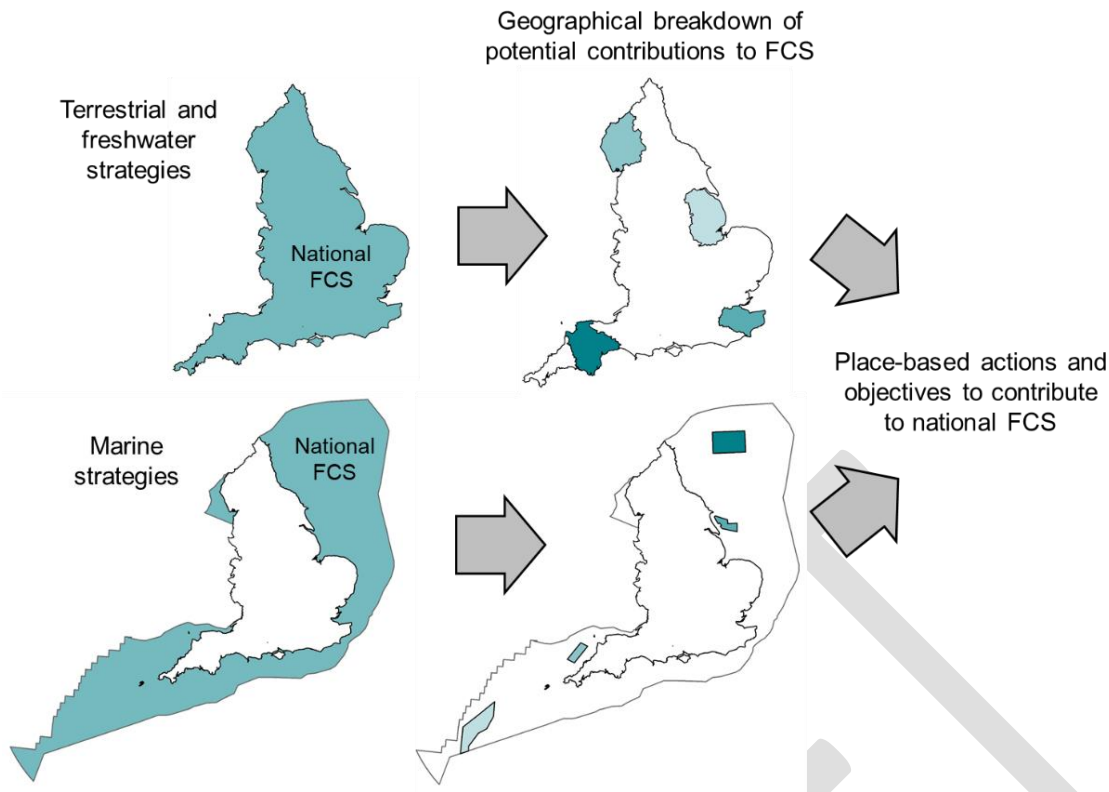

Figure 2. Favourable Conservation Status (FCS) strategies break down long-term national conservation ambitions into place-based conservation objectives and actions.

4. Production process

The production of FCS strategies is managed by the Natural England Defining FCS (DFCS) project team. It is a collaborative process, involving input and advice from relevant internal and external specialists, practitioners, and stakeholders.

The steps in this process, summarised in Figure 3, are as follows:

1. The DFCS lead for the strategy identifies and agrees on the time commitment required for relevant specialists and practitioners to review and input to the strategy. These must include a Natural England specialist and may include Natural England staff linked to relevant delivery mechanisms (e.g., for a place-based strategy, Area Team and/or protected site staff), external specialists, and other external stakeholders. For strategies sharing or crossing a UK country border, the relevant statutory nature conservation bodies and/or other agencies must be involved.
2. The first draft of the strategy is produced – either by the DFCS lead or an external specialist – using this guidance document and the relevant strategy template document.
3. The draft is reviewed by the reviewers identified in step 1.
4. The DFCS lead, with input from the Natural England specialist, makes the necessary changes to the strategy based on the comments of reviewers. Any unresolved concerns are left as comments in the document.

5. The strategy is taken to the Technical Steering Group of the DFCS project for quality assurance of its technical content, particularly whether the priority actions are appropriate to deliver FCS.
6. The DFCS lead makes the necessary changes to the strategy following the advice of the Technical Steering Group.
7. The strategy is signed off by the DFCS team's Senior Responsible Owner, in consultation with the DFCS lead and other relevant Senior Advisers, assuming it meets quality assurance standards.
8. The strategy enters the Natural England publication process. During this process, the signed-off strategy can be viewed on the DFCS project SharePoint site until a formatted version is published.
9. The strategy is disseminated to relevant Natural England staff, particularly those linked to relevant delivery mechanisms, and external partners. There should be a bespoke communication plan for each strategy.

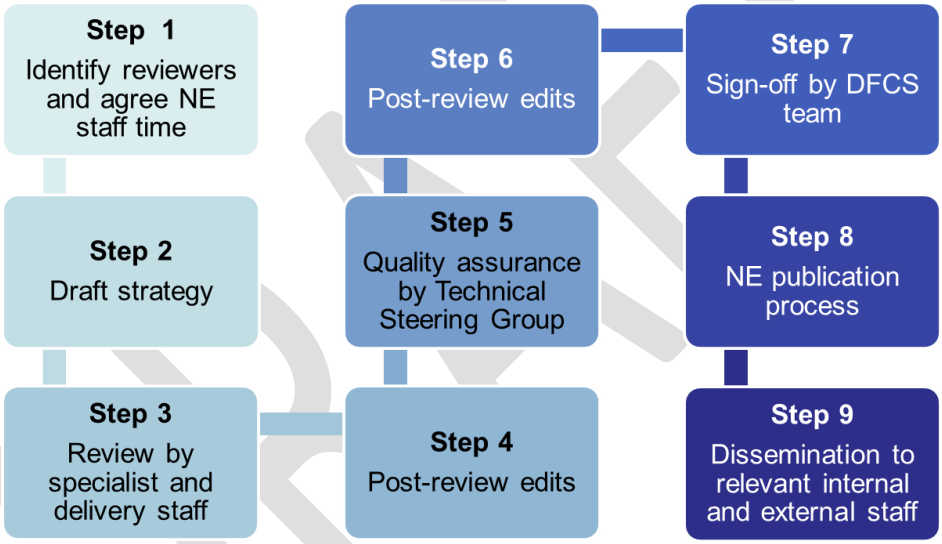

Figure 3. The process of producing Favourable Conservation Status strategies.

5. Key contents

5.1 Background to the species, habitat, or place

FCS strategies include necessary background, including current conservation status and the primary threats faced by the feature(s). This background information must also highlight any significant changes in status since the publication of FCS definitions. In habitat and place-based strategies authors need to identify the focal species and habitat(s). This section should not repeat general information already provided in definitions.

5.2 Favourable values

FCS strategies restate the national favourable values for the focal feature(s) from their definitions and describe the changes in each parameter required to achieve FCS. Habitat and place-based strategies should summarise the favourable values of multiple features as succinctly as possible.

Habitat and place-based strategies do not require FCS definitions for all features related to a habitat, group of habitats, or place, but they should be based on definitions for a representative range of habitats and species. Ideally, FCS definitions will be available for habitats with large numbers of associated threatened species and for umbrella species – those whose conservation is expected to confer protection to many naturally co-occurring species – to maximise the potential benefits of strategies.

Place-based strategies additionally require place-scale contributions to FCS to be defined for focal features. The Defining FCS team is undertaking a pilot project in Purbeck Heaths National Nature Reserve (2021-2024) to investigate how to apply FCS in a place, including how to define FCS at smaller spatial scales. This document may be updated with further guidance on this process following the outcomes of the Purbeck pilot. Currently, authors should follow the principles described in Annex 1.

As with national definitions, place-scale definitions should consider other species and habitats so that favourable values reflect the balance of species and habitats that would be expected in naturally or near-naturally functioning ecosystems.

5.3 Delivering Favourable Conservation Status

This section in a strategy sets out the priority conservation actions needed to achieve Favourable Conservation Status and the places with the greatest opportunity for those actions to contribute to FCS.

5.3.1 Priority actions

Authors must consider a range of evidence when assessing how to achieve FCS. Evidence on the efficacy of conservation actions is likely to be particularly useful. Natural England species and habitats specialists will be able to recommend relevant internal and external sources of evidence. For some features, FCS definitions may begin to point to conservation priorities and, in such cases, can be used as starting points. For species strategies it may be useful to refer to species recovery curves, where available, to assess the sequential actions needed for recovery. Natural England staff can provide this information. Authors should also refer to any existing published conservation strategies or action plans for the feature(s).

Priority actions must be ambitious (where required), specific, and concise, highlighting high-level strategic actions rather than detailed measures for individual sites. The actions

described are those needed to achieve FCS, regardless of whether FCS is considered achievable within the timeframe of the strategy.

For place-based strategies, priority actions must align with any existing management plans for protected sites. They should be co-developed with local staff; this process will be trialled in the Purbeck place-based pilot. Place-based strategies must consider how to achieve FCS for multiple features in a place. There is potential for conflicting situations to emerge where different features require conservation actions that are incompatible in a particular area e.g., if species require different successional stages of habitat. Authors should seek to balance the contributions of different features to FCS to deliver a naturally or near-naturally functioning ecosystem. This may be achievable through spatial prioritisation, see example 1 below (Venn and others, 2020). However, difficult decisions will be required in some situations, with some features losing out to others. This process should involve collaboration between species and habitat specialists and may involve refinement of place-scale definitions. The ongoing Purbeck pilot project is trialling this process and will produce specific guidance on how to integrate multiple FCS definitions in a place. General advice on integrating delivery for habitats and species in a place can be found in the Nature Networks Evidence Handbook (Crick and others, 2020) and Generating more integrated biodiversity objectives (Mainstone and others, 2018).

Example 1. Balancing FCS for multiple features in a place - bracken cover in heathland. The spread of bracken (*Pteridium aquilinum*) is a problem on many lowland heathlands and generally a low target, <5-10%, is set for the cover of dense bracken. However, some typical heathland species, including smooth snake *(Coronella austriaca)*, high brown fritillary *(Fabriciana adippe),* and wild gladiolus *(Gladiolus illyricus)* require denser stands of bracken. This conflict can be balanced by prioritising spatially across a site e.g., by maintaining a low cover of dense bracken, typically at <5%, except in areas identified as species-rich bracken stands supporting wild gladiolus where up to 90% bracken cover is considered acceptable.

Authors of terrestrial place-based strategies may make use of Natural England's Habitat Network Maps (Edwards and others, 2020) and Habitat Potential Maps. Habitat Potential Mapping – which is still in development – could be particularly useful, as it allows users to consider where it might be possible to expand specific habitats and thus how to achieve FCS for habitats and associated species. The maps produced by this tool indicate the restoration potential for different habitats and ecosystems across England based on biophysical properties (e.g., soil characteristics, climatic conditions) in the absence of constraints imposed by current and historic land use. The tool assigns a given area of land to one or more habitat types, thus potentially allowing users to explore contrasting habitat restoration options. The tool is based on plant communities that are aggregated into 'habitats' and 'ecosystems' according to the major defining requirements of hydrology (wet to dry) and pH (acidic to alkaline). This may be expanded to include salinity in the future.

Marine strategies may make use of similar habitat potential mapping tools, including blue carbon maps (Swaile and others, 2022) and restoration potential maps for specific habitats and species (Environment Agency 2015; Environment Agency 2020; Marine Management Organisation, 2020).

5.3.2 Place-based delivery

Where possible, given the data available for the feature(s), authors evaluate where there is the greatest potential to contribute towards FCS. Place-based breakdowns are determined strategically. This could mean focusing efforts on maintaining a population or area of habitat that contributes strongly to FCS, or restoring an extirpated population or area of degraded habitat with strong potential to contribute to FCS in the future. Where possible, authors should also identify where specific actions are needed in certain areas.

Place-based contributions to FCS must be determined at a spatial scale appropriate to the focal species, habitat(s), or place. This will depend on the spatial distribution of features, ecological characteristics, and the spatial scale of monitoring. For species and habitat strategies in terrestrial environments, a county- or National Character Area-scale focus would facilitate a strong link between FCS strategies and delivery. Quantifying place-based contributions may be more challenging in marine environments, potentially necessitating a coarser scale approach e.g., by marine plan areas. For strategies focused on coastal features, authors may assess FCS contributions by county or Area Team region. Understanding spatial variation in FCS is less important in place-based strategies but may be considered at a finer spatial scale.

5.4 Achievability of Favourable Conservation Status

This section in a strategy assesses whether FCS can be achieved within the defined timeframe of the strategy. Where FCS is not considered achievable, authors identify the key constraints to delivering FCS and set time-bound objectives towards FCS.

5.4.1 Assessing achievability

Authors must first define the overall timeframe of the strategy. The timeframe chosen must be medium-term (e.g., 25 years) and should be appropriate to the conservation needs and recovery of the focal species, habitat(s), or place.

When assessing achievability, authors must consider the following factors:

- The current status of the focal feature(s) and the changes required to meet FCS.
- The past impacts of conservation actions on the status of the feature(s), which will reflect earlier societal choices and other factors that affect delivery.
- The delivery mechanisms available to implement conservation actions.
- Any external factors that may impede or facilitate progress towards FCS.

Authors must evaluate the potential tools and mechanisms available to deliver the priority conservation actions necessary for achieving FCS, highlighting where there is a lack of capacity to deliver the necessary actions and identifying the future changes that are needed to address this (e.g., increased resources).

Authors must evaluate how external factors may impede or facilitate progress towards FCS, particularly persistent threats such as climate change. They should also consider other constraints, such as lack of social-political acceptability or budget, which may constrain the implementation of conservation actions. Authors should avoid duplicating information from analyses of current and past threats included in FCS definitions, instead focusing on how external factors are likely to influence progress towards FCS during the timeframe of a strategy.

Where FCS is not achievable with the timeframe of the strategy, an indication of the expected long-term trajectory of delivery of FCS should be included.

5.4.2 Objectives

If Favourable Conservation Status is considered achievable within the strategy's timeframe, the objectives of the strategy are the favourable values for each feature. If not, objectives must be defined that represent ambitious steps towards FCS (Fig. 4). Objectives are determined for each conservation status parameter (e.g., natural range and distribution, population size) and must be specific, measurable, and achievable. In place-based strategies authors must take care to ensure that objectives are compatible, building on any potential conflicts identified when setting priority actions (section 4.3.1).

When defining objectives, authors should consider the expected trajectory of delivery (Fig. 4) and may define short-term milestones towards objectives (e.g., 6 years, matching the period of statutory reporting). For example, where a strategy uses habitat restoration, the author must consider the time required to restore a particular habitat and for the return of any associated focal species.

Authors must include a concise plan for monitoring and evaluating progress towards FCS. This should describe the monitoring processes currently in place for the focal species, habitat(s), or place, including the type of data collected and its frequency of collection. In place-based strategies, this plan must align with any existing site-based monitoring protocols. It may also identify any gaps in existing monitoring, such as a lack of surveys for certain species, and any additional monitoring needs. Authors should describe how monitoring data will be used to evaluate progress towards FCS, for instance by describing any modelling required to quantify conservation status from monitoring data. Authors may refer to the approaches used to define FCS for the focal feature(s).

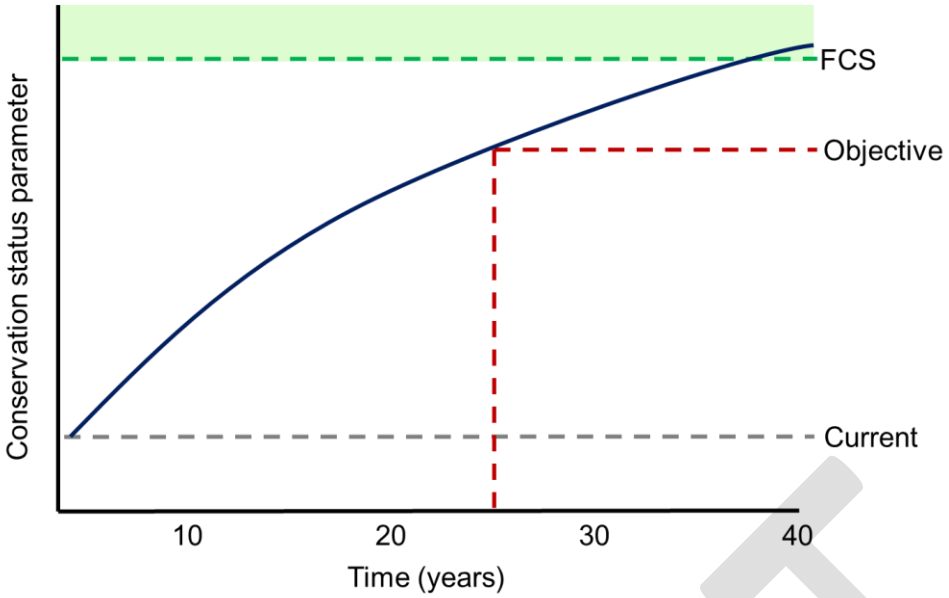

Figure 4. A hypothetical trajectory (blue line) to Favourable Conservation Status (FCS) and an objective for a 25-year strategy.

6. Periodic review

FCS strategies should be periodically reviewed by the DFCS team and updated in response to any substantive new evidence or advice becoming available. A six-year review period is recommended for all strategies, in line with the review cycle of FCS definitions and statutory reporting of FCS for the United Kingdom. The review period should align with the milestones in the strategy.

Changes to a FCS strategy must be considered under the following circumstances:

- If a FCS definition undergoes a significant revision.
- If new data on the conservation status of the feature(s) become available.
- If there is a change in the delivery mechanisms available, for example if a significant new delivery tool becomes available.
- If new information on persistent threats and drivers such as climate change becomes available.
- If different actions or priorities are proposed for the feature(s) as part of other Natural England work areas.
- If monitoring shows that implementation of the strategy is not delivering FCS at the expected trajectory.

7. References

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8. Annex 1 – Defining place-scale Favourable Conservation Status

The below guidance may be updated following the outcomes of the Defining FCS team's place-based pilot project in Purbeck Heaths National Nature Reserve (2021-2024).

Place-scale favourable values should be downscaled from national favourable values – provided the national situation is representative of the situation in the place – using the approach and evidence in the national definition. For example, the England definition may propose an extension to the current range of a species because there is evidence of an historical contraction in range and the species is not currently occupying its full natural range. If a similar contraction in range has occurred in the place, or where evidence on a change in range is lacking but the same historical pressures that caused a contraction nationally acted in the place, then the increase proposed for England should be applied locally. When downscaling favourable values, use one of the following approaches:

i. If data allow, apply the same approach used for the national definition. For example, if favourable range has been defined for a species in England based on mapping of suitable habitat, subset these data to the place if the data exist at an appropriate spatial scale to do so.
ii. Apply the same proportional change represented by national favourable values relative to current values. For example, for a species with current and favourable population sizes in England of 1,000 and 1,500 respectively (thus requiring a 50% increase to achieve FCS), the favourable population for a place with a current population of 100 would be 150. In some cases, it may be justifiable to apply a higher local proportional increase where there is proportionally more habitat or potential habitat available relative to nationally.

Where the local situation is different to the situation described in the national definition, for example there has been no contraction in range or a very different level of contraction, favourable values must be developed independently using Natural England's guidance for defining FCS in England (Mousley & van Vliet 2021). Authors must describe how place-scale favourable values relate to the national context.

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