Executive summary

Hosted by the British Trust for Ornithology, the Joint OSPAR/HELCOM/ICES Working Group on Seabirds met in Thetford, U.K., 10–14 October 2016. The meeting was chaired by Morten Frederiksen, Ian Mitchell and Volker Dierschke, and was attended by 20 members and invited experts representing eleven countries, two of them by correspondence. Following the tradition of the preceding meetings, the objectives were to continue development of OSPAR and HELCOM seabird indicators under the Marine Strategy Framework Directive and to discuss seabird-related issues relevant to human uses of the sea. The meeting consisted of a series of interconnected workshops, where subgroups with floating membership discussed Terms of Reference. Report chapters were drafted by Term of Reference leads and collated by the chairs.

Based on JWGBIRD’s work of the preceding years, both OSPAR and HELCOM seabird indicators are currently in operation. During 2016, counts of seabirds at breeding sites and along coast during the non-breeding season were used to calculate the indicators, with the results ready to feed the OSPAR Intermediate Assessment (IA 2017) and the HELCOM Holistic Assessment (HOLAS II, in 2018). However, the analyses for the NE Atlantic and the Baltic suffered from database problems and late data deliveries, and a Term of Reference of the meeting was designated to discuss how such problems could be circumvented in future.

Another Term of Reference dealt with the possibilities of integrating at-sea data of seabirds from the non-breeding season into the abundance indicators, because such data can be used to indicate the status of marine areas off the coast, can be linked more directly to environmental data (including fisheries) and allow to include species not breeding in the respective regions. The review of at-sea monitoring projects in place or planned in most OSPAR and HELCOM contracting parties opened perspectives to combine the respective aerial and ship-based surveys in an internationally coordinated way. Therefore, a general approach including recommendations for analyses was reported to the meeting and is attached as an annex to this report. Based on this, the meeting discussed related issues such as the choice of species covered and appropriate survey seasons, spatial coverage and transect designs, data formats, how to deal with ice cover during surveys, and how to combine at-sea and coastal data. Funding for coordinated at-sea surveys needs clarification, and it was recommended to form a steering group under the umbrella of a legal body to enable fund-raising.

An ongoing problem for many seabird species is the bycatch in fishing gear, namely in gillnets and at longlines. To reduce the number of seabirds incidentally caught, the European Union adopted an ‘Action Plan for reducing incidental catches of seabirds in fishing gears’ (COM(2012)665final) in 2012. In a Term of Reference, the meeting reviewed the implementation of this Action Plan in the EU Member States, including additional information from non-EU countries. Relevant issues discussed and resulting in recommendations by JWGBIRD are the monitoring of bycatch (including Remote Electronic Monitoring) and fishing effort (e.g. adapting VMS-tracking technology to small-scale vessels), risk assessments in order to identify areas of overlap of high fishing effort and high densities of vulnerable seabirds, and mitigation measures. JWGBIRD welcomes the offer of closer collaboration with the ICES Working Group on Bycatch of Protected Species (WGBYC).

Many seabird species living in European waters and covered by OSPAR and HELCOM indicators are not continuously present in those areas, but either migrate west- or southwards for wintering or have their breeding origin further east in the Russian
Arctic. This means that bird numbers measured in the indicators are exposed to various threats acting outside the reporting areas of OSPAR and HELCOM, and thus may have impact on the indicator results. As it is meaningful to know more about such external influence on indicator output, the meeting reviewed threats occurring in West Africa (capture of gannets for human consumption, trapping of terns), in the South Atlantic (longline fisheries) and in Arctic Russia and Greenland (hunting) as some prominent examples. Altogether it appeared that there is only little knowledge about such threats outside European waters and that more attention should be paid to this.