

SG Natural Environment 2: Protection of the wider biodiversity and geodiversity

- A. We will only approve development, subject to other policies, if the applicant has also:**
- a) identified measures that will be taken to enhance biodiversity and geodiversity in proportion to the potential opportunities available and the scale of the development in line with good practice (this should include habitat creation and management, and the restoration of habitats and wildlife networks, where possible, incorporating existing habitats);**
 - b) included an ecological management plan, where required; AND**
 - c) demonstrated that due regard has been given to the extent of organic and organic-rich soils on sites, to limit loss of soil carbon and the potential contribution of soil disturbance to greenhouse gas emissions.**
- B. In the case of development that would have a significant adverse impact on the population or conservation status of any European Protected Species, we will not approve it, unless a thorough assessment of the site has demonstrated that:**
- 1) no adverse impact will be made on the species; OR**
 - 2) in the case of development that is likely to have an adverse effect it satisfies the following:-**
 - (i) the effect is not assessed as significant; and**
 - (ii) the development is required for preserving public health or public safety or for other imperative reasons of overriding public interest, including those of a social or economic nature; AND**
 - (iii) there is no satisfactory alternative site or solution; AND**
 - (iv) any impact will be suitably mitigated.**
- C. In the case of development that is likely to have a significant adverse impact on species protected under British or European law, or on relevant habitats listed in Annex 1 of the Habitats Directive, or on semi-natural habitats or species of importance to biodiversity, or on areas of importance to geodiversity, we will only approve it, where a thorough assessment of the site has demonstrated that:**
- 1) its public benefits at a local level clearly outweigh the value of the habitat for biodiversity conservation or of the site for geodiversity; AND**
 - 2) the development will be sited and designed to minimise adverse impacts on its environmental quality, ecological status or viability; AND**
 - 3) there will be no fragmentation of habitats as a result of the development; AND**
 - 4) any impact will be suitably mitigated.**

Where the impacts of a development on an international or national natural heritage resource are uncertain, but there are good scientific grounds that significant irreversible damage could occur, the precautionary principle will apply. The applicant should modify the development to eliminate the risk of irreversible damage.

Reasoned Justification

This supplementary guidance gives strong protection to habitats, species, and geological features even when they are not associated with specifically designated nature conservation sites, in order to fulfil the Council's biodiversity duty as required under the *Nature Conservation (Scotland) Act 2004*. In addition, species, habitats, geology and soils provide a valuable indicator of sustainability, and it is very important that every opportunity is taken to protect, enhance and retain the quality of the wider environment.

A list of the protected species within the UK is provided in chapter 4 of the Planning Advice titled *Natural Heritage*. Although not formally designated, a number of semi-natural habitats and species of importance to biodiversity are identified as priority habitats and species in the North East Local and UK Biodiversity Action Plans (NE LBAP and UKBAP). The list of NE LBAP priority habitats and species is provided in the Planning Advice in chapter 5. Other habitats and species of importance are provided in the Scottish Biodiversity List.

Biodiversity is short for 'biological diversity' and includes all habitats and species. It is not restricted to specially designated sites, threatened species or habitats, but involves the entire natural environment. Locally biodiversity is important as it gives a distinctive character to an area, whether it is a river valley, woodland or an area of coastline. Within settlements, areas of wildlife habitat can make an important contribution to people's quality of life. However, the loss of semi-natural habitats also devalues the environment in general and increases pressure on designated sites.

Geodiversity is the variety of rocks, minerals, fossils, landforms, sediments and soils, together with the natural processes which form and alter them. The diversity of rocks, landforms and soils, and the processes which shape our mountains, rivers and coasts, form the basis for most of Scotland's landscapes and the foundation upon which plants, animals and human beings live and interact. Scotland's geodiversity is a resource of national and international importance for interpreting past geological processes of global significance, such as volcanism, continental drift and ice ages, and for understanding contemporary global change. Some of Scotland's rocks contain a rich variety of internationally important fossils and our organic soils contain some of the largest soil carbon stocks (e.g. peat) in Europe. Geodiversity is an asset for economic development (including geotourism-based activities), recreation and leisure activities. It is also a source of inspiration for art, sculpture, music and literature. The protection, active management and interpretation of geodiversity is increasingly referred to as 'geoconservation'.

Geological sites of importance are identified in the Geological Conservation Review (GCR) and are listed in the Planning Advice in chapter 6. The majority of these sites are also designated as Sites of Special Scientific

Interest (SSSI) and Supplementary Guidance 11.1: *Protection of nature conservation sites* would also apply.

The relationships between soil functions and biodiversity, water and atmospheric quality are fundamental to making a thorough assessment of the potential impacts of the development. Soils provide the basis for food and biomass, controlling and regulating environment function (regulating water flow and quality), carbon storage, providing valued habitats and sustaining biodiversity, preserving cultural and archaeological heritage, providing raw materials and as a platform for building and roads. Soils with high organic content (peat and organo-mineral soils) act as carbon sinks and are potential contributors to greenhouse gas emissions when disturbed. As a result, development should not unnecessarily disturb carbon-rich soils.

The fragmentation or isolation of habitats should be avoided. There are opportunities to enhance biodiversity in every development. This should be proportionate to the scale and type of development and designed into the proposal at an early stage.

For all major developments an ecological management plan should be prepared setting out how these habitats/networks will be maintained. Where possible, opportunities to restore habitat networks should be sought.

The protection and enhancement of biodiversity should be considered for all types of development, from a housing scheme to altering or extending an existing building. Retaining trees, watercourses and 'wild' areas for mammals, birds and insects should be considered, along with contributing to LBAP habitat and species targets, or erecting bat, bird and/or bee boxes for smaller proposals. Further advice is available from SNH, Aberdeenshire Council and the NE LBAP Officer.

Where a development is likely to have an adverse effect on species protected under European or national legislation, the supplementary guidance requires applicants to submit supporting evidence to justify the proposal. This supporting evidence must demonstrate both the need for the development and that a full range of possible alternative courses of action has properly been examined and none found to be acceptable to meet the need identified. Where there is evidence to suggest that a habitat, geological feature or species of importance exists on the site, the applicant must undertake an assessment and/or survey at their expense of the site's natural environment. Where a development is likely to have significant effects on the environment, an *Environmental Impact Assessment* (EIA) will be required. An assessment should include:

- a) a full assessment of the habitats and species present together with the potential impact of the development on the biodiversity and/or geodiversity interest of the site;
- b) proposals for appropriate mitigation;
- c) identification of opportunities for enhancement;
- d) an assessment of cumulative impact, where appropriate; and
- e) a survey of soil types and their roles in supporting biodiversity and environmental services, when requested.

All assessments and/or surveys should be undertaken by an independent and competent consultant.

It is important that individual developments and the cumulative impact of proposals (e.g. new roads and houses) do not lead to a significant loss to Aberdeenshire's biodiversity and geodiversity. Nature conservation sites and non-designated areas are susceptible to development encroachment.