

PLANNING ADVICE: NUMBER 6 / 2015

BASELINE ECOLOGICAL SURVEY

A baseline ecological survey provides an initial assessment of the ecological interest of the site, informs the layout of a development and identifies the need for further habitat and species surveys.

This work should be undertaken at an early stage in the consideration of a development proposal. This will allow any additional surveys to be carried out at the correct time of year and inform the layout of the development to minimise impact on biodiversity. Submission of a planning application with all the relevant information will avoid delays in the processing of the planning application.

The survey should assess the impact of the proposed development on ecosystem services and should assess any cumulative impact.

Surveys should also identify opportunities to enhance biodiversity, for example through the creation and linking of habitats or through Sustainable Urban Drainage ponds or wetlands.

Timing and extent of preliminary ecological appraisals

Ideally initial surveys would be undertaken during May to September when species are more active and vegetation can be recorded. However there may be other optimal times for survey depending on which species are present. Badger and water vole are generally easier to see early in the year before the vegetation grows too tall, whereas winter surveys may be required if the site is likely to be important for overwintering birds.

It may be necessary to visit the site more than once and to survey at different times of the day to identify the full range of protected or notable species likely to be present. Surveys should include both the proposed development site, together with adjacent areas which may be impacted on by the proposed development for example due to changes in drainage.

Any limitations resulting from the timing or extent of surveys should be clearly identified.

A baseline ecological survey should be carried out by a suitably qualified person who can undertake a full assessment of the range of interest of the site.

The scope and content of a baseline ecological survey

The survey should in general cover the following

- 1) Location and site plan to indicate the area to be surveyed and assessed.
- 2) Results of a desktop study to identify the likely ecological interest of the site. This should include the extent and details of any designated sites, habitat data from previous surveys and species records. This information is available from the North East Scotland Biological Records Centre, NBN and local recording groups. (Contact details overleaf).
- 3) Dates of visits and any surveys carried out.
- 4) A description of the site including physical characteristics, altitude and any features present such as watercourses or floodplains.
- 5) If wildlife habitats are present, these should be identified and mapped using Phase 1 or Integrated Habitat System. A list of key plant species present is also useful together with some assessment of the quality of the habitat and its current management. Connectivity of habitats both within and outwith the development should be mapped. The presence of any invasive non-native species should be noted.
- 6) Features such as hedgerows, ponds and drystone walls should be mapped together with any significant individual or groups of trees.

- 7) The presence of any protected or notable species should be recorded together with an indication of numbers and the way in which this species is using the site for example for feeding, roosting or breeding. Signs of species such as droppings, walkways or nests should be recorded together with the potential for the site to support notable species e.g any buildings or trees which may be suitable for bat roosts. Where appropriate, an assessment of the importance of this site for the species should be made, together with an assessment of any cumulative impact.
- 8) Any features of geological or geomorphological interest should be mapped and detailed.
- 9) The requirement for any additional surveys, and the scope of those surveys, should be identified. It may be useful to discuss further surveys with the Aberdeenshire Council Planning Department before carrying them out to ensure that all the necessary information is gathered. These surveys should be carried out at the correct time of year by a competent person following agreed methodology as outlined in Protected Species Surveys Planning Advice.
- 10) The survey should include an initial assessment of the likely impact of the proposed development on any designated sites, wildlife habitats and protected and notable species. This should include both short-term impacts during the development phase together with longer-term impacts.
- 11) Where appropriate recommendations for avoidance of impact should be included. This should consider re-siting elements of the proposal, timing of works and methodology to allow avoidance/reduction of impact.
- 12) Opportunities for enhancement of biodiversity should be recorded, including any opportunity to enhance habitat networks. Further details are provided in Opportunities for Biodiversity Enhancement Planning Advice.
- 13) Photographs should be included where they assist with the understanding of the site.

Protected and notable species

These include those identified by the following:

- Conservation and Natural Habitats & c. Regulations 1994
- Wildlife and Countryside Act 1981
- UK and Local Biodiversity Action Plan priority species lists
- Scottish Biodiversity List
- Species of Conservation Concern.

Sources of data & information

- North East Scotland Biological Records Centre (NESBReC) www.nesbrec.org.uk
- National Biodiversity Network (NBN) <http://data.nbn.org.uk>
- Scottish Natural Heritage (SNH) www.snh.org.uk
- North East Local Biodiversity Action Plan (NE LBAP) for lists of priority species. www.nesbiodiversity.org.uk
- Royal Society for the Protection of Birds (RSPB)
- North East Raptor Study Group www.scottishraptorstudygroup.org/north-east.html
- Scottish Badgers www.scottishbadgers.org.uk
- Botanical Society for the British Isles Scotland <http://bsbi.org/scotland>
- Chartered Institute of Ecology and Environmental Management. Guidelines for Preliminary Ecological Surveys www.cieem.net

Data Sharing

Aberdeenshire Council encourages the release of habitat and species information recorded during any surveys to Local Records Centre (NESBReC – North East Scotland Biological Records Centre) and other relevant data holders.