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7. ECOLOGY

7.1 Executive Summary

- 7.1.1 This Chapter sets out the methods used to describe and evaluate the potential significant effects on the non-avian ecological and nature conservation interests within a relevant study area pertinent to the Proposed Development. Appropriate study areas (the 'Survey Area') for each specific survey type were derived from best practice guidance as set out in the main body of this Chapter.
- 7.1.2 Statutory and non-statutory sites for nature conservation are present within 5 km of the Proposed Development. This includes hydrological connectivity to the River Dee Special Area of Conservation (SAC), the intersection of Ancient Woodland Inventory (AWI) sites and a Local Nature Conservation Site (LNCS).
- 7.1.3 Most of the Survey Area within the western reaches of the Proposed Development consists of blanket bog and upland heathland habitats, whereas the central and eastern reaches are dominated by conifer plantations and agricultural farmlands. Evidence of protected species was recorded across the Survey Area, including evidence of pine marten, otter, red squirrel, badger and herptiles. In addition, there is suitable habitat for bats, water vole, wildcat and fish species.
- 7.1.4 Potential impacts associated with the construction phase include: habitat loss and / or fragmentation, potential disturbance to protected species, and construction related pollution impacts. Potential impacts associated with the operation phase include: disturbance and vegetation management required for routine maintenance requirements for OHL infrastructure and the operational corridor.
- 7.1.5 The Proposed Development has been designed to avoid, and failing which minimise, impacts on important habitats and protected species where practicable. This has been achieved through an iterative design process and commitment to embedded mitigation. This process combines with further commitments to the implementation of mitigation measures both prior to construction and throughout the construction period, followed by monitoring once operational, allows for potential effects on several habitats and species present to be scoped-out of the assessment. The following Important Ecological Features (IEFs) were taken forward to the assessment stage: Shoolbraid / Belhangie Woods AWI site, blanket bog, upland heathland, other broadleaved woodland, other Scots pine woodland, wildcat, roosting bats and badger.
- 7.1.6 The ecological impact assessment (EclA) concluded that following the successful implementation of mitigation measures, guided by Species Protection Plans (SPPs), an Outline Biodiversity Enhancement Plan (oBEP) and General Environmental Management Plans (GEMPs), residual effects upon AWI sites and protected species are considered **Negligible** and **Not Significant**, and residual effects upon habitats are considered **Minor Adverse** and **Not Significant**. The oBEP will be developed further to compensate for the effects on habitats lost, and further enhance habitats to achieve an overall Biodiversity Net Gain (BNG) and beneficial environmental impact overall.
- 7.1.7 A detailed assessment of the impacts on the qualifying features of the River Dee SAC has been undertaken in a Shadow Habitats Regulations Appraisal (HRA) for the Proposed Development, to meet the requirements of the Conservation of Habitats and Species Regulations (the 2017 Habitat and Species Regulations). The Shadow HRA concludes there would be no adverse impact on the integrity of any European site as a result of the Proposed Development following the implementation of mitigation measures.

7.2 Introduction

- 7.2.1 This Chapter considers the potential impacts of the construction and operation of the Proposed Development on non-avian ecological features including designated sites, terrestrial habitats and protected species, and reaches conclusions on the significance of likely predicted residual effects. Where required, it provides details

of mitigation and/or compensation measures which have been identified to avoid, minimise, and compensate for any anticipated adverse effects on ecological features, in line with the mitigation hierarchy. The mitigation hierarchy is a widely accepted good practice framework used to manage the potential for negative effects arising from developments. It follows the steps of Avoidance, Minimisation, Restoration and Offsetting, and is referenced within the National Planning Framework 4 (NPF4)¹ glossary stating: "*The mitigation hierarchy indicates the order in which the impacts of development should be considered and addressed.*"

7.2.2 The specific nature of the Proposed Development is described in detail in **Chapter 3: The Proposed Development**, and shown in detail on **Figures 3.1a to e**. This Chapter concerns non-avian ecological features only. The assessment of potential effects on ornithological features is considered within **Chapter 8: Ornithology**. This Chapter should be read with reference to the project description in **Chapter 3**, as well as other chapters of the Environmental Impact Assessment (EIA) Report of relevance, including **Chapter 9: Geology, Hydrology and Hydrogeology** and **Chapter 11: Forestry** (including **Figures 11.1a-d** which displays the operational corridor within forest and woodland areas).

7.2.3 The specific objectives of this Chapter are to:

- Describe the current baseline conditions for habitats and protected species;
- Describe the assessment methodology and significance criteria used in completing the impact assessment;
- Describe the potential effects, including direct, indirect and cumulative effects;
- Describe the mitigation measures proposed to address any potentially significant effects; and
- Assess the residual effects remaining, following the implementation of mitigation.

Statement of Qualifications

7.2.4 This Ecological Impact Assessment (EclA) has been carried out by SLR Consulting Ltd (SLR) and overseen and reviewed by Technical Director's Richard King and Alison Wood. A table presenting relevant qualifications and experience of key staff involved in the preparation of this Chapter is included in **Appendix 5.1** of this EIA Report.

7.3 Legislation, Policy and Guidance

Legislation

7.3.1 Full consideration has been given to all relevant nature conservation legislation when carrying out this assessment. This includes the following:

- European Union Council Directive 92/43/EEC on the Conservation of Natural Habitats and Wild Flora and Fauna (the 'Habitats Directive')²;
- The Conservation (Natural Habitats, &c.) Regulations 1994 (as amended) ('the Habitats Regulations')³;
- Environmental Impact Assessment Directive 2014/52/EU⁴;
- The Ramsar Convention on Wetlands (1975)⁵;

1 National Planning Framework 4 (online) Available at: <https://www.gov.scot/publications/national-planning-framework-4/>. (last accessed 08/10/2025).

2 European Parliament, 2009. European Union Council Directive (online) Available at: <https://eur-lex.europa.eu/eli/dir/1992/43/oj/eng> (last accessed 08/10/2025)

3 UK Government, 1994. The Conservation (Natural Habitats, &c.) Regulations 1994 (online) Available at: <https://www.legislation.gov.uk/ukxi/1994/2716/contents> (Last accessed 08/10/2025).

4 European Union, 2014. Environmental Impact Assessment Directive 2014/52/EU (online) Available at: <https://www.legislation.gov.uk/eudr/2014/52/contents> (last accessed 08/10/2025).

5 The Ramsar convention on wetlands, 1975 (online) Available at: <https://www.ramsar.org/> (Last accessed 08/10/2025)

- The Wildlife and Countryside Act 1981 (as amended) (WCA)⁶;
- The Nature Conservation (Scotland) Act 2004 (as amended)⁷;
- The Wildlife and Natural Environment (Scotland) (WANE) Act, 2011 (as amended)⁸;
- The Protection of Badgers Act 1992, as amended by the Wildlife and Natural Environment (Scotland) Act (2011)⁹;
- The Water Environment and Water Services (Scotland) Act 2003¹⁰;
- The Electricity Works (Environmental Impact Assessment) (Scotland) Regulations 2017¹¹ ('the EIA Regulations'); and
- The Water Environment (Controlled Activities) (Scotland) Regulations 2011¹².

Policy and Guidance

7.3.2 The assessment considers the relevant aspects of Scottish policy, Planning Advice Notes and other relevant guidance. This includes the following:

- National Planning Framework 4 (NPF4)¹;
- Planning Advice Note 60: Planning for Natural Heritage¹³;
- Aberdeenshire Local Development Plan 2023¹⁴;
- Aberdeenshire Council Pollinator Action Plan 2022-2027¹⁵;
- Guidelines for Ecological Impact Assessment in the UK and Ireland: Terrestrial, Freshwater and Marine. Chartered Institute of Ecology and Environmental Management (CIEEM)¹⁶;
- Scottish Biodiversity List (SBL)¹⁷;
- Local Biodiversity Action Plan for the North East Scotland (LBAPNES)¹⁸.
- Scottish Environment Protection Agency (SEPA) Guidance on Assessing the Impacts of Development Proposals on Groundwater Abstractions and Groundwater Dependent Terrestrial Ecosystems¹⁹ and,

6 UK Government: The Wildlife and Countryside Act 1981 (as amended) (online) Available at: <https://www.legislation.gov.uk/ukpga/1981/69/contents/>. (last accessed 08/10/2025)

7 Scottish Government: Nature Conservation (Scotland) Act 2004.(Online) Available at: <https://www.legislation.gov.uk/asp/2004/6/contents> (last accessed 08/10/2025).

8 Scottish Government: The Wildlife and Natural Environment (Scotland) (WANE) Act, 2011.(online) Available at: <https://www.legislation.gov.uk/asp/2011/6/contents> (last accessed 08/10/2025).

9 Scottish Government: The Protection of Badgers Act 1992. As amended by the Wildlife and Natural Environment (Scotland) Act, 2011. Available at: <https://www.legislation.gov.uk/ukpga/1992/51/contents>. (last Accessed 08/10/2025).

10 Scottish Government: The Water Environment and Water Services (Scotland) Act 2003 (online) Available at: <https://www.legislation.gov.uk/asp/2003/3/contents> (last accessed 19/09/2025)

11 HM Government: The Electricity Works (Environmental Impact Assessment) (Scotland) Regulations 2017 (Online) Available at: <https://www.legislation.gov.uk/ssi/2017/101/contents/made> (last accessed 08/10/2025).

12 Scottish Government: The Water Environment (Controlled Activities) (Scotland) Regulations 2011 (online) Available at: <https://www.legislation.gov.uk/ssi/2011/209/contents> (last Accessed 08/10/2025).

13 Scottish Government (online) Available at: <https://www.gov.scot/publications/pan-60-natural-heritage/>. (last accessed 08/10/2025).

14 Aberdeenshire Council (online) Available at:<https://www.aberdeenshire.gov.uk/planning/plans-and-policies/ldp-2023/>. (last accessed 08/10/2025).

15Aberdeenshire Council (online) Available at: <https://www.aberdeenshire.gov.uk/environment/natural-heritage/biodiversity/>. (last accessed 08/10/2025).

16 CIEEM (online) Available at: <https://cieem.net/wp-content/uploads/2018/08/EcIA-Guidelines-v1.3-Sept-2024.pdf> (last accessed 08/10/2025).

17 NatureScot (2020) Scottish Biodiversity List (online) Available at: <https://www.nature.scot/scotlands-biodiversity/scottish-biodiversity-strategy/scottish-biodiversity-list> (last accessed 08/10/2025).

18 North East Scotland Biodiversity Partnership (2019) Important Habitats for Biodiversity – our Local Biodiversity Action Plan. (online) Available at: <https://www.nesbiodiversity.org.uk/biodiversity-information-for-developers/important-habitats-for-biodiversity-in-the-north-east-of-scotland/> (last accessed 08/10/2025).

19 SEPA, 2024.(online) Available at: [guidance-on-assessing-the-impacts-of-developments-on-groundwater-dependent-terrestrial-ecosystems.docx](#) (last accessed 08/10/2025).

- NatureScot Guidance: Advising on peatland, carbon-rich soils and priority peatland habitats in development management²⁰.

7.4 Scope of Assessment

7.4.1 The scope of the assessment has been determined through consultation with stakeholders through a formal EIA scoping process.

7.4.2 In November 2024 an EIA Scoping Report was submitted to the Scottish Government's Energy Consents Unit (ECU) to accompany a request for the Scottish Ministers to adopt an EIA Scoping Opinion under the EIA Regulations. This assessment concentrates on the effects of construction and operation of the Proposed Development as described upon Important Ecological Features (IEFs). Ecologically sensitive habitats or species populations of local or higher value ecological value are considered IEFs (see **Section 7.7**). The following effects and mitigation measures required were identified at the Scoping stage and during the EIA process for consideration in this assessment:

Potential effects: Construction and Operation

- Temporary or permanent direct or indirect loss of, or damage to, statutory and non-statutory designated sites, groundwater dependent terrestrial ecosystems (GWDTEs) and sensitive terrestrial and aquatic habitats;
- Temporary or permanent loss of, obstruction of, or disturbance to legally protected and notable species' resting sites;
- Temporary or permanent loss of, modification or disturbance to protected species foraging areas and commuting routes;
- Accidental killing and injury of protected and notable species, during both construction and advance site clearance activities;
- Accidental pollution of surface watercourses from suspended sediment, hydrocarbon and oil pollution. Potential sources of suspended sediments on construction sites include excavations, exposed ground and stockpiles, plant and wheel washing, dust, and mud on access roads. Sources of oils and hydrocarbons include leaks from access vehicles and powered hand tools;
- Inadvertent soil erosion, compaction and excavation losses during access construction; and
- Accidental pollution to habitats with indirect effects on associated protected and notable species.

Potential effects: Decommissioning

7.4.3 Effects arising from the process of decommissioning the Proposed Development have not been assessed. Although decommissioning can result in adverse effects on IEFs, the level of impact would depend on the habitats and species present at the time of decommissioning, which cannot be reliably predicted. Furthermore, the Proposed Development is being applied for in perpetuity and proposals for future decommissioning are not known.

Potential effects: Cumulative effects

7.4.4 The assessment has considered the potential for cumulative effects to arise where the Proposed Development could combine with other consented, proposed and reasonably foreseeable future developments.

Mitigation Measures identified at Scoping

7.4.5 Mitigation measures defined within the EIA Scoping Report included the commitment to undertake an iterative design process avoiding IEFs where practicable, following the recognised mitigation hierarchy of avoidance, reduction, enhancement and compensation, taking into account professional judgement from technical specialists and adherence to best practice guidelines.

7.4.6 The Scoping Report identified the requirement of the following plans to ensure the documentation of mitigation measures required for the management of potential negative effects arising from the Proposed Development; the implementation and audit of which would be overseen by an Environmental Clerk of Works (ECoW):

- Construction / General Environmental Management Plan (CEMP / GEMP);
- Species Protection Plans (SPPs); and
- Outline Biodiversity Enhancement Plan (oBEP).

7.4.7 Additional mitigation measures and assessment needs were identified during consultation with key stakeholders, as identified below in **Section 7.5**, consultation.

7.5 Consultation

7.5.1 In undertaking the ecology baseline and impact assessments, consideration has been given to the EIA Scoping Opinion issued by ECU on 28th February 2025. **Table 7.1** below provides a summary of the key responses which are relevant to ecology and outlines how they have been addressed.

7.5.2 Full details on the consultation responses and Scoping Opinion can be reviewed in **Chapter 4: Scope and Consultation**, and associated appendices

Table 7.1 Scoping Responses relevant to Ecology

Consultee	Key Consultee Comments	Applicant Comment
NatureScot (15/01/2025)	<p>The scale and nature of this proposal is such that its effects on the natural heritage have potential to be significant.</p>	<p>The potential for effects on Nature Conservation Designations arising from the Proposed Development is discussed in Section 7.10 with corresponding mitigation measures outlined in Section 7.11 .</p> <p>The potential for effects on flora and fauna arising from the Proposed Development is discussed in Section 7.10, with corresponding mitigation measures outlined in Section 7.11.</p>
	<p>Due to the proximity of the underground cable (UGC) section and the proximity of the western section of overhead line (OHL) to the River Dee catchment (including the River Dee Special Area of Conservation (SAC)), measures will need to be taken, particularly in respect to handling peat soils, to ensure that no pollution of local watercourses could result in SAC species and their supporting habitats being adversely impacted downstream. The Applicant will provide information to inform a Habitats Regulations Appraisal (HRA).</p>	<p>A shadow Habitats Regulations Appraisal (HRA) and Appropriate Assessment (AA) has been undertaken. This is provided within Appendix 7.7: Shadow Habitats Regulations Appraisal (HRA). The Shadow HRA concludes there will be no adverse impact on the integrity of any European site following the implementation of mitigation measures.</p> <p>For clarity, UGC sections associated with the Proposed Development would fall under the Applicant's permitted development rights. The environmental effects of the installation of the permitted development UGC are considered within Appendix 1.1: Permitted Development Works Appraisal</p>

Consultee	Key Consultee Comments	Applicant Comment
	<p>The UGC and OHL passes through areas of Class 1 peatland²⁰; therefore, wherever possible the alignment, access tracks and other associated infrastructure should avoid sections of deep peat and protect priority peatland habitats.</p>	<p>and form part of the cumulative assessment (Section 7.13).</p> <p>Route and alignment optioneering has undergone iterative design changes informed by peat probing results to avoid deep peat and protect priority peatland habitats where possible (see Chapter 2: The Routeing Process and Alternatives).</p> <p>The potential for effects on peat arising from the Proposed Development is considered within Chapter 9 Geology, Hydrology and Hydrogeology and the potential for effects on peatland habitats is discussed within Section 7.10 below. Mitigation measures will be implemented and outlined in Section 7.11 to avoid significant adverse effects.</p>
<p>Aberdeenshire Council (04/02/2025)</p>	<p>Protected and rare species including parsley fern (<i>Cryptogramma crispera</i>), mountain-male fern (<i>Dryopteris oreades</i>) and northern damselfly (<i>Coenagrion hastulatum</i>) have been recorded within the vicinity of the Proposed Development. Consideration of these species should therefore be included within the EIA. The scoping report proposes scoping out species not recorded during initial surveys. Local knowledge should be incorporated into the decision to scope out any species.</p>	<p>Noted.</p> <p>Detailed results of desk study sources are provided in Appendix 7.1: Ecology Desk Study. Habitat survey results are provided within Appendix 7.2: UKHab and NVC Survey Report. Protected species surveys results are provided within Appendices 7.3 - 7.5.</p> <p>The results of the desk study information and terrestrial ecology baseline field surveys, including habitat and protected species surveys, are summarised within Section 7.6. Local knowledge brought forward during public consultation stages has been incorporated into the design and assessment process. Rare or protected species are scoped out of the assessment where not identified in field surveys and where habitat suitability is limited. However, pre-construction surveys would be conducted to inform micro-siting and mitigation procedures concerning rare or protected species.</p>
	<p>Wildcat (<i>Felis silvestris</i>) has been identified as a potential issue at Fetteresso substation and the Council's</p>	<p>The potential for effects on wildcat arising from the Proposed Development is discussed in Section 7.10 with</p>

²⁰ Scotland's Soils (2016) Carbon and Peatland 2016 Map. (Online) Available at Carbon and peatland 2016 map | Scotland's soils

Consultee	Key Consultee Comments	Applicant Comment
	<p>natural heritage planner agrees with objectors that wildcat should not be scoped out of assessment.</p> <p>Any biodiversity enhancements must be relevant to the local environment and support local biodiversity objectives. Details of enhancements and their location is required.</p>	<p>corresponding mitigation measures outlined in Section 7.11. Construction works would be undertaken in accordance with the Applicant's Species Protection Plans (SPPs) (see Appendix 3.4) that have been developed and agreed with NatureScot, and which include wildcat.</p> <p>A Biodiversity Net Gain (BNG) Report is provided in Appendix 7.6: Outline Biodiversity Enhancement Plan, which outlines the habitat creation units required to achieve an overall enhancement of biodiversity. Opportunities for appropriate enhancement measures to support local biodiversity are provided within the report.</p>
<p>Dee District Salmon Fishery Board (DDSFB) (22/01/2025)</p>	<p>The DDSFB strongly disagree that drainage impact assessment, water quality monitoring, cumulative impacts and increased flood risk (caused by the operation and maintenance of the proposed development) should be scoped out, as these have the potential to significantly impact salmonid populations within the area.</p> <p>Consideration should be given to other indicator species such as aquatic invertebrate communities. Baseline surveys of these species could support water quality monitoring.</p> <p>The DDSFB are of the opinion that it cannot be assumed that the development will not impact endangered Atlantic salmon and other environmental features within the River Dee and its tributaries and seek further consultation with the developer throughout the development process.</p> <p>There is the potential for sediment and other pollution to enter the River Dee and surrounding watercourses as a result of the construction phase of the development. Strict adherence to SEPA's pollution prevention guidelines is required and CIRIA guidance on "The control of water pollution from</p>	<p>The potential for effects on aquatic interests arising from the Proposed Development is discussed in Section 7.10 with corresponding mitigation measures outlined in Section 7.11.</p> <p>Mitigation and pollution / contamination prevention measures will be incorporated into a site-specific Construction Environmental Management Plan (CEMP), an outline of which is included in Appendix 3.5. This document would form the basis and describe the measures of all pollution prevention and construction method statements to be employed, to ensure there will be no pollution/contamination incidents during construction. This will also detail the biosecurity measures that will be adhered to during the construction and operation phase of the Proposed Development.</p> <p>Watercourse crossings (detailed in Appendix 9.4: Schedule of Watercourse Crossings) will be designed in accordance with best practice measures during the detailed design stage and reviewed by a hydrologist as discussed in Chapter 9 Geology, Hydrology and Hydrogeology. The Applicant will also consult with DDSFB during this period.</p> <p>Detailed consideration of the potential for connectivity with the watercourses of the River Dee upper catchment is considered</p>

Consultee	Key Consultee Comments	Applicant Comment
	<p>construction sites (SP156)²¹ should also be followed. Sediment and pollution control measures should always remain effective during and post construction and these must be checked and maintained on a regular basis.</p> <p>The construction phase of the Proposed Development has the potential to both directly and indirectly affect fish and aquatic invertebrates as a result of increased sediment loads; habitat loss; obstructing fish migration and transmission of pathogens and non-native species.</p> <p>Where possible, water crossings should be designed so that they do not impact the bed and banks of the watercourse and CIRIA guidance on “Culvert design and operation (C689)²²” should be followed. Temporary watercourse diversions and instream works within the Dee catchment, including Cowrie and Carron waters, should be consulted on with the DDSFB in advance.</p> <p>Appropriate consideration should be given to the design and construction of access tracks, borrow pits, hard standing and Site drainage to minimise impacts on watercourses and it is expected that Scottish Natural Heritage best practice guidelines on “Constructed Tracks in the Scottish Uplands” (2013)²³ are followed.</p> <p>The DDSFB suggests that an Ecological Clerk of works (ECoW) should be present during the Proposed Development. Furthermore, the DDSFB wish to be provided with further information on the proposed biosecurity</p>	<p>within Section 7.10 of this Chapter. Furthermore, a shadow HRA and AA is provided within Appendix 7.7 specifically with respect to the River Dee SAC European Designation. The shadow HRA has concluded that there would be no significant adverse effects on the integrity of the qualifying features and conservation objectives of the River Dee SAC following the implementation of mitigation measures.</p> <p>An ECoW will be present during the construction phase of the Proposed Development.</p>

21 Masters-Williams, H., Heap, A., Kitts, h., Greenshaw, L., Davis, S., Fisher, P., Hendrie, M., and Owens, D. (2001) Control of water pollution from construction sites. Guidance for consultants and contractors (C532D), CIRCA, London.

22 CIRIA: Guidance on Culvert Design and Operation (online) Available at: <https://www.ciria.org/ItemDetail?iProductCode=C689F&Category=FREEPUBS&WebsiteKey=3f18c87a-d62b-4eca-8ef4-9b09309c1c91> (last accessed 08/10/2025)

23 NatureScot (formerly SNH) Construction Guidance in the Scottish Uplands (online) Available at: <https://web.archive.org/web/20221020132020/https://www.nature.scot/sites/default/files/2022-09/final%20-%20Publication%202015%20-%20Constructed%20tracks%20in%20the%20Scottish%20Uplands.pdf> (last accessed 08/10/2025)

Consultee	Key Consultee Comments	Applicant Comment
	<p>measures to assess the risk of pathogens and non-native species between the River Dee and other catchments.</p>	
<p>Scottish Forestry (20/01/2025)</p>	<p>Woodland removal should only be carried out if there is no other option and where significant and clearly defined additional public benefits would be achieved. Where woodland felling is necessary, design approaches should minimise the amount of felling required and compensatory planting must be carried out in line with Policy 6: “Forestry, woodland and trees”, within National planning framework 4¹.</p> <p>Scottish Government policy on the “Control of woodland removal (2019)²⁴” should also be adhered to and felling, restocking and compensatory planting must be carried out in line with the UK Forestry standard. Any additional felling not included within the planning application requires permission from Scottish Forestry under the “Forestry and land management (Scotland) act, 2018²⁵.” Any compensatory planting may also need to be considered under the “Forestry (Environmental Impact assessment) (Scotland) regulations, 2017²⁶” and should follow Scottish Forestry’s guidance booklet: “Woodland creation application guidance²⁷”.</p>	<p>Detailed consideration of woodland removal and associated compensatory commitments are provided within Chapter 11 - Forestry.</p>
<p>Scottish Environment Protection Agency (SEPA)</p>	<p>A detailed Outline Peat Management Plan (PMP) must be provided.</p>	<p>An Outline Peat Management Plan (PMP) and Peatland Condition Assessment (PCA) is provided in Appendix 9.2 and Appendix 9.3, respectively, of Chapter 9: Geology, Hydrology and Hydrogeology.</p>

24 Scottish Governments Policy on the control of woodland removal: Implementation Guidance (2019) (online) Available at: <https://www.forestry.gov.scot/publications/349-scottish-government-s-policy-on-control-of-woodland-removal-implementation-guidance/viewdocument/349> (last accessed 08/10/25)]

25 Forestry and Land Management (Scotland) Act 2018 (online) Available at: <https://www.legislation.gov.uk/asp/2018/8/contents> (last accessed 08/10/2025)

26 The Forestry (Environmental Impact Assessment) (Scotland) Regulations 2017 (online) Available at: <https://www.legislation.gov.uk/ssi/2017/113/contents> (last accessed 08/10/2025)

27 Scottish Forestry: Woodland Creation Guidance (2016) (online) Available at: <https://www.forestry.gov.scot/publications/109-woodland-creation-application-guidance/viewdocument/109> (last accessed 08/10/2025)

Consultee	Key Consultee Comments	Applicant Comment
(21/01/2025)	Groundwater Dependant Terrestrial Ecosystems (GWDTEs) must be considered, being protected under the Water framework directive. A National Vegetation Classification (NVC) survey must be carried out and a set of drawings showing all GWDTEs within a 100 m radius of all excavations shallower than 1m and within a 250 m radius of excavations deeper than 1 m must be provided. If the minimum buffers cannot be achieved, a detailed site-specific risk assessment is required in line with SEPA's "Guidance On Assessing The Impacts Of Developments On Groundwater Dependant Terrestrial Ecosystems" (amended January 2025) ¹⁹	Comprehensive habitat surveys, including NVC have been undertaken, with results summarised in paragraphs 7.8.8 to 7.8.9 and Table 7.8 of this Chapter. Full methods, results and descriptions are provided in Appendix 7.2: UKHab and NVC Survey Report . This has informed the assessment of potential GWDTEs, that are subsequently considered in full in terms of groundwater dependency within Chapter 9: Geology, Hydrology and Hydrogeology .
Energy Consents Unit (ECU) (28/02/2025)	The ECU advises that Special Areas of Conservation (SACs) where fish are a qualifying feature are identified and considered along with felling operations, particularly in acid-sensitive areas. Scoping guidelines provided by Marine Directorate - Science Evidence Data and Digital (MD-SEDD) ²⁸ for overhead line development should be followed to ensure that all necessary information is included within the EIA report.	Detailed consideration of the potential for connectivity with the watercourses of the River Dee upper catchment is considered within Section 7.10 of this Chapter. Furthermore, a shadow HRA and AA is provided within Appendix 7.7: Shadow Habitats Regulations Appraisal (HRA) specifically with respect to the River Dee SAC European Designation. The shadow HRA has concluded that there would be no significant adverse effects on the integrity of the qualifying features and conservation objectives of the River Dee SAC following the implementation of mitigation measures.

7.6 Survey Methodology

Desk Study

- 7.6.1 A comprehensive desk study has been completed to collate existing information on statutory nature conservation designations listed for biological features (see **Appendix 7.1**). The desk study sought to confirm statutory nature conservation designations (excluding geological features) within 10 km of the Proposed Development, non-statutory nature conservation designations within 5 km of the Proposed Development, and areas of ancient woodland (listed on the AWI)²⁹ within 2 km (see **Figure 7.1**).

²⁸ Scottish Government Marine Directorate: Scoping guidelines (online) Available at: https://www.esbenergy.co.uk/docs/default-source/business-solutions/scoping-framework---annex-b-standing-advice-and-annex-1.pdf?sfvrsn=b6b33450_1 (last accessed 08/10/2025)

²⁹ NatureScot, 2000. Ancient Woodland Inventory. (online) Available at: <https://opendata.nature.scot/datasets/ancient-woodland-inventory/explore>. (last accessed 08/10/2025)

7.6.2 Existing records of protected or otherwise notable species from within the last 10 years were also compiled within 2 km of the Proposed Development. Information and survey results available for other studies and surveys submitted with respect to previous planning applications within the vicinity have also been considered as supplementary evidence for specific features and activity.

7.6.1 Data for priority/notable species and designated sites were obtained from the following databases:

- NatureScot sitelink website³⁰ ;
- The National Biodiversity Network (NBN) Atlas website (only open access data consulted)³¹
- Scotland’s Environment Interactive Map³² ;
- Northeast Scotland Biological Records Centre (NESBReC)³³; and
- Survey and Scoping of Wildcat Priority Areas (Littlewood *et al.*, 2014)³⁴.

Field Surveys

7.6.2 The area within which the field surveys were undertaken varied depending on the feature. Specific details of the extent of each Survey Area are presented below in **Table 7.2** with the full details provided within **Appendix 7.2: UKHab and NVC Survey Report; Appendix 7.3: Confidential Badger Survey Report; Appendix 7.4: Confidential Otter Survey Report and Appendix 7.5: Protected Species Survey Report.**

7.6.3 Field Survey Areas were designed to take into account the full extent of the Limit of Deviation (LoD) for the Proposed Development (as set out in **Chapter 3 – The Proposed Development**), in addition to appropriate buffers required for habitat and protected species survey methodologies, as detailed below:

- Habitat surveys: undertaken within 250 m of the Proposed Development (OHL and access tracks) LoD, which is the distance within which SEPA considers impacts on potential GWDTEs from deep excavations (>1 m). Shallower excavations (<1 m) require to be assessed to 100 m, as per SEPA guidance^{Error! Bookmark not defined.}. This survey buffer was reduced to 50 m for the access tracks that are not anticipated to involve excavations; and
- Protected species surveys: undertaken within 100 m of the proposed OHL LoD and 50 m of the proposed access tracks LoD³⁵, though this was extended to 250 m upstream and downstream of water crossings to survey for otter (*Lutra lutra*) presence.

Table 7.2 Ecology Survey Areas and Dates

Survey Type	Extent of Survey Area	Survey Date	Surveyor
UK Habitat Classification Surveys	OHL LoD & 250 m buffer	13th-17th May 2024	ITP Energised / SLR
	Access tracks and 50 m buffer	16th- 20th September 2024	
	(250 m buffer for access tracks in mire habitats)	16th – 18th December 2024	

30 NatureScot, 2025. Sitelink homepage (online) Available at: <https://sitelink.nature.scot/home> (last accessed 08/10/2025)

31 National Biodiversity Network (NBN), 2025. NBN Atlas. (online) Available at: <https://nbnatlas.org/> (last accessed 08/10/2025)

32 Scottish Government, 2025. Scotland’s environment map. Available at: <https://map.environment.gov.scot/sewebmap/> (last accessed 08/10/2025)

33 North East Scotland Biodiversity Records Centre (NESBREC), 2025. (online) Available at: <https://nesbrec.org.uk> (last accessed 08/10/2025)

34 Littlewood, N.A., Campbell, R.D., Dinnie, L., Gilbert, L., Hooper, R., Iason, G., Irvine, J., Kilshaw, K., Kitchener, A., Lackova, P., Newey, S., Ogden, R. & Ross, A. 2014. Survey and scoping of wildcat priority areas. Scottish Natural Heritage Commissioned Report No. 768. (online) Available at: <https://www.nature.scot/doc/naturescot-commissioned-report-768-survey-and-scoping-wildcat-priority-areas> (last accessed 08/10/2025)

35 Where access tracks fall within the OHL LoD, the access track LoD would be merged with the OHL LoD.

Survey Type	Extent of Survey Area	Survey Date	Surveyor
		24th – 27th March 2025	
National Vegetation Classification (NVC) Surveys		16th- 20th September 2024 31st March – 2nd April 2025	ITPEnergised / SLR
Protected Species Surveys	<p>Ground Level Tree Assessment (GLTA) / Preliminary Roost Assessment (PRA): 50 m buffer from the OHL LoD and access tracks</p> <p>Otter (<i>Lutra lutra</i>) and Water Vole (<i>Arvicola amphibius</i>): 250 m upstream and downstream of water crossings within the OHL or access tracks LoD's.</p> <p>Additional Protected Species: Pine marten (<i>Martes martes</i>), red squirrel (<i>Sciurus vulgaris</i>), wildcat (<i>Felis silvestris</i>), hare (<i>Lepus</i>), badger (<i>Meles meles</i>), herptiles: OHL LoD and 100 m buffer; Access tracks LoD and 50 m</p>	<p>16th- 20th September 2024</p> <p>16th – 18th December 2024</p> <p>24th – 27th March 2025</p>	ITPEnergised / SLR

UK Habitat Classification Survey

7.6.4 A UK Habitat Classification (UKHab) survey was completed following the standard methods described by UKHab guidance (2023)³⁶ and provided in **Appendix 7.2: UKHab and NVC Survey Report**. Standard habitat types were assigned, and ecological notes were recorded for each habitat type, recording dominant, typical and notable plant species, and relevant ecological characteristics. Floral nomenclature followed Stace (2019)³⁷, with results reflecting the conditions at the time of survey. The habitat survey area is shown on **Figure 7.2**.

³⁶ UKHab (2023) UK Habitat Classification (online) Available at: <https://www.ukhab.org/> (last accessed 08/10/2025)

³⁷ Stace, C, A. (2019) New Flora of the British Isles. C & M Floristics

National Vegetation Classification (NVC) Survey

- 7.6.5 The survey followed the standard methodology set out in the NVC Users' Handbook³⁸ and is provided in detail in **Appendix 7.2: UKHab and NVC Survey Report**. Plant communities were identified from representative quadrat samples with reference to the standard community descriptions and constancy tables³⁹ using both quantitative (quadrat) and qualitative sampling.
- 7.6.6 Target notes were taken to describe the vegetation, habitats and any specific features too small to map, along with a full species list available at the time of survey, and notes and identification of any areas of potential GWDTes.
- 7.6.7 The survey excluded detailed assessment of any highly modified habitats, such as conifer plantations and agricultural areas, which have been mapped using the UKHab classification. Floral nomenclature followed Stace (2019)³⁷ and Atherton, Bosanquet & Lawley (2010)⁴⁰.
- 7.6.8 Communities were evaluated in terms of their nature conservation interest, e.g. through inclusion on the SBL or local Biodiversity Action Plan (BAP), as well as the SEPA criteria for assessing areas of potential groundwater dependence¹⁹.

Protected Species Surveys

- 7.6.9 In addition to ad-hoc species observations during the extended habitat surveys to inform route and alignment selection, dedicated protected mammal surveys were undertaken concurrently for terrestrial mammals, and riparian species. Full details are provided in **Appendix 7.3 (Confidential Badger Survey Report); Appendix 7.3: Confidential Badger Survey Report; Appendix 7.4: Confidential Otter Survey Report and Appendix 7.5 (Protected Species Report)**. Survey methods for bat, otter, water vole, and badger are summarised below. However, an assessment of habitat suitability and an active search of evidence for other protected species, including red squirrel, pine marten, hare, wildcat, and herptiles was also conducted.

Bat

- 7.6.10 An initial Ground Level Tree Assessment (GLTA) of trees within the Survey Area was carried out to assess their suitability for supporting roosting bats in line with Bat Conservation Trust (BCT) guidance⁴¹. A Preliminary (bat) Roost Assessment (PRA) was also conducted to assess the suitability of potential roost features (PRFs) for bat species.
- 7.6.11 The potential for the trees and structures to support roosting bats was ranked in accordance with the criteria set out in the BCT guidelines⁴¹. The potential of PRF within trees to support roosting bats are categorised in accordance with the BCT guidelines, as follows:
- Further assessment required (FAR) to establish if PRF's are present in the tree.
 - PRF-I: PRF is only suitable for individual bats or very small numbers of bats either due to size or lack of suitable surrounding habitats.
 - PRF-M: PRF is suitable for multiple bats and may therefore be used by a maternity colony.

38 Rodwell, (2006). NVC User's handbook. (online) Available at: <https://hub.jncc.gov.uk/assets/a407ebfc-2859-49cf-9710-1bde9c8e28c7> (last accessed 08/10/2025)

39 (Rodwell, J.S (ed.), 1991 et seq.), British plant communities, Volumes 1-5. Cambridge: Cambridge University Press.

40 Atherton, I, Bosanquet, S, & Lawley, M. (2010) Mosses and Liverworts of Britain and Ireland a field guide. British Bryological Society, Plymouth.

41 Collins, J (ed), 2023. Bat conservation trust (BCT). Bat Surveys for Professional Ecologists: Good Practice Guidelines 4th edition. (online) Available at: <https://www.bats.org.uk/resources/guidance-for-professionals/bat-surveys-for-professional-ecologists-good-practice-guidelines-4th-edition> (last accessed 08/10/2025)

Badger

7.6.12 The survey comprised a search for setts and other signs of badger activity, e.g. latrines, dung pits, pathways, snagged hair and signs of foraging in line with NatureScot guidance⁴². Where setts were identified within the Survey Area, each sett entrance was mapped and photographed with sett entrances then grouped and classified as a main sett, annex sett, subsidiary sett or outlier sett.

Otter

7.6.13 An otter field signs survey was undertaken of all watercourses to identify otter spraints, feeding remains, footprints, slides, resting places and potential holt / natal den sites, and included a 20 m riparian zone where suitable habitat was present. Throughout the survey, overhanging banks, cavities, bankside vegetation and riparian features, such as boulders and mud, were searched for the following signs of otter use, broadly in accordance with the approach described by NatureScot⁴³ and Chanin⁴⁴.

Water Vole

7.6.14 A water vole field signs survey was conducted on all suitable watercourses to identify latrines, burrows, feeding stations, paths / runs at the water's edge, and footprints. The search was undertaken in the riparian zone and up to 20 m away from the water's edge for evidence of water voles. Cognisance was taken to the 'Water Vole Mitigation Handbook'⁴⁵ with additional reference to the 'Water Vole Conservation Handbook'⁴⁶.

7.7 Assessment Methodology and Significance Criteria

Criteria for Assessing Sensitivity of Receptors

7.7.1 The assessment presented within this Chapter follows the principles set out in the CIEEM Guidelines¹⁶ with impact significance determined on the basis of the sensitivity of ecological features and the magnitude of change. **Table 7.3** below, lists the criteria used to determine the value of ecological features in a geographical context.

7.7.2 The sensitivity of an ecological receptor is a measure of the receptor's tolerance to disturbance, resilience, ecological service and conservation importance. These factors are reflected through legislation and policies, and geographical importance criteria as detailed below in **Table 7.3**. Determination of the level of sensitivity of an IEF is based on a combination of its geographical importance criteria and conservation status. The importance of an ecological receptor can be due to a variety of reasons and is as per relevant legislation outlined in **Section 7.3**. For example, importance can be as a result of the quality or extent of designated habitats or areas, habitat or species rarity, or the extent of the species range and/or decline.

7.7.3 Categories of geographical importance (from international to less than local level) which relate to ecological or nature conservation importance, together with examples and criteria of how to place a site – defined by its ecological attributes – are set out in the CIEEM guidance¹⁶.

7.7.4 Both direct and indirect impacts to IEFs are considered. Direct ecological impacts are changes that are directly attributable to a defined action, e.g. the physical loss of habitat occupied by a species during the construction

42 NatureScot: Planning and development: standing advice and guidance documents. (online) Available at: <https://www.nature.scot/professional-advice/planning-and-development/planning-and-development-advice/planning-and-development-standing-advice-and-guidance-documents> (last accessed 08/10/2025)

43 NatureScot: Standing advice for planning consultations – Otters. (online) Available at: [www.nature.scot: https://www.nature.scot/doc/standing-advice-planning-consultations-otters](https://www.nature.scot/doc/standing-advice-planning-consultations-otters) (last accessed 08/10/2025)

44 Chanin, 2003. Conserving Natura 2000 Rivers Monitoring Series no. 10. Monitoring the Otter. Peterborough: English Nature. (online) Available at: [cieem.net: https://cieem.net/resource/monitoring-the-otter/](https://cieem.net/resource/monitoring-the-otter/) (last accessed 08/10/2025)

45 Dean, M., Strachan, R., Gow, D., Andrews, R., Matthews, F., & Chanin, P. (2016). Watervole mitigation handbook. Mammal Society Mitigation Guidance Series. The Mammal Society.

46 Strachan, R., Moorhouse, T., & Gelling, M. (2011). Water vole conservation handbook. Wildlife Conservation Research Unit.

process. Indirect ecological impacts are attributable to an action but affect ecological resources through effects on an intermediary ecosystem, process or feature, e.g. fencing of a development site may cause scrub to invade marshy grassland.

Table 7.3 Geographical Importance of Ecological Features

Geological Importance	Criteria	Examples
International	<p>Nature conservation resource, i.e. designated nature conservation area, habitat or populations of species of international importance.</p> <p>N.B. For designations, such as a SAC or Ramsar, this may also include off-site features on which the qualifying population(s) or habitat(s) are considered, from the best available evidence, to depend. This is referred to as Functionally Linked Land (FLL).</p>	<p>International nature conservation areas:</p> <ul style="list-style-type: none"> • Any SAC; • Any candidate SAC (cSAC); and • Any Ramsar wetland. <p>Significant numbers of a designated population outside the designated area.</p> <p>A site supporting more than 1% of the EU population of a species.</p>
National (i.e. Scotland)	<p>Nature conservation resource, i.e. designated nature conservation area, habitat or populations of species of national importance.</p> <p>N.B. For designations, such as a Site of Special Scientific Interest (SSSI) or a National Nature Reserve (NNR), this may also include off-site features on which the qualifying population(s) or habitat(s) are considered, from the best available evidence, to depend.</p>	<p>National nature conservation areas:</p> <ul style="list-style-type: none"> • Any SSSI or NNR designated for biological feature(s). • A site supporting more than 1% of the UK population of a species. <p>Nationally important population/assemblage of a European Protected Species (EPS) or species listed on Schedule 5 of the WCA⁶.</p>
Region (Aberdeenshire)	<p>Nature conservation resource, i.e. nature conservation designation, habitat or species, of importance on a regional scale.</p>	<p>Statutory and non-statutory nature conservation designations:</p> <ul style="list-style-type: none"> • Any Local Nature Reserve (LNR); • Any Scottish Wildlife Trust (SWT) reserve; • Any Local Biodiversity Site (LBS); and • Ancient Woodland listed on the NatureScot Ancient Woodland Inventory²⁹ <p>A regional-scale important population/area of a species or habitat listed on the Scottish Biodiversity List (SBL)¹⁷ as requiring conservation action.</p> <p>A regional-scale important population / area of a species or habitat listed on the BAP⁴².</p>

Geological Importance	Criteria	Examples
		A regional-scale important population / assemblage of an EPS or species listed on Schedule 5 of the WCA ⁶ .
Local (i.e. within 2 km of the Proposed Development)	Nature conservation resource, e.g. a habitat or species of importance in the context of the local district.	<p>A breeding population of a species on the SBL¹⁷.</p> <p>A breeding population of a species or a viable area of a habitat that is listed in a Local BAP because of its rarity in the locality.</p> <p>An area supporting 0.05%-0.5% of the UK population of a species.</p>
Less than Local	Unremarkable, common and widespread habitats and species of little/no intrinsic nature conservation value.	Common, widespread, agricultural and/or exotic species (such as non-native escapees).

7.7.5 Where an ecological feature (i.e. a habitat or species) qualifies under two or more importance criteria, the higher value is applied to the feature. Within this Chapter any ecological feature of local or higher value is considered an IEF.

Criteria for Assessing Magnitude of Change

7.7.6 CIEEM guidelines state that impacts should be quantified, if possible, and expressed in absolute or relative terms (e.g. the amount of habitat lost, percentage change to habitat area, percentage decline in a species population). This approach has been followed here, where possible. Magnitude refers to size, amount, intensity and volume. However, following the language of other chapters in this EIA Report, impact magnitude has also been categorised with reference to the definitions detailed below in **Table 7.4**. The evaluation of ecological features to a national or international importance level is relatively straightforward as guidance for defining these exists; for example, (SACs or SSSIs). However, for identifying features at a regional or local level, criteria it is not as easily defined. Where possible, the importance of ecological features identified within the Survey Area have been defined by the geographical ranges outlined in **Table 7.3**.

Ecological Zone of Influence

7.7.7 The Ecological Zone of Influence (EZol) is defined as the area within which there may be ecological features subject to effects from the Proposed Development. Such effects could be direct, e.g. Habitat loss resulting from land-take or removal of a building occupied by roosting bats, or indirect, e.g. noise or visual disturbance causing a species to move out of the EZol. The EZol was determined through:

- Review of the existing baseline conditions based on desk study results, field surveys and information supplied by consultees;
- Identification of sensitivities of ecological features, where known;
- The outline design of the Proposed Development and approach to construction; and
- Liaison with other technical specialists involved in the assessment, e.g. hydrologists, hydrogeologists and ornithologists.

Characterising Ecological Impacts and Effects

7.7.8 In accordance with the CIEEM guidelines, the following definitions are used for the terms 'impact' and 'effect':

- **Impact** – Actions resulting in changes to an ecological feature. For example, the construction activities of a development removing a hedgerow.
- **Effect** – Outcome to an ecological feature from an impact. For example, the effects on a species population from loss of a hedgerow.

7.7.9 In accordance with the CIEEM guidelines, when determining impacts on IEFs, reference is made to the following:

- **Beneficial or adverse** – whether the impact has a beneficial (positive) or adverse (negative) effect in terms of nature conservation objectives and policy.
- **Magnitude** – the size of an impact, in quantitative terms where possible.
- **Extent** – the area over which an impact occurs.
- **Duration** – the time for which an impact is expected to last. Where possible, defined in relation to ecological characteristics i.e. species lifetimes, habitat recoverability.
- **Timing and frequency** – whether impacts occur during critical life stages or seasons, or how many times the IEF may be impacted by an activity.
- **Reversibility** – a permanent impact is one that is irreversible within a reasonable timescale or for which there is no reasonable chance of action being taken to reverse it. A temporary impact is one from which a spontaneous recovery is possible.

Table 7.4: Levels of Impact Magnitude

Level of Impact	Definition
No Impact	No detectable impacts on the ecological resource, even in the immediate term.
Negligible	Detectable impact but reversible within 12 months. Not expected to affect the conservation status of the nature conservation designation, habitat or species under consideration.
Low	Detectable impacts, and may be irreversible, but either of sufficiently small-scale or of short-term duration to have no material impact on the conservation status of the nature conservation designation, habitat or species population.
Medium	Detectable impact on the status of the nature conservation designation, habitat or species population in the medium term but is reversible/replaceable given time, and not a threat to the long-term integrity of the feature.
High	Irreversible impact on the status of the nature conservation designation, habitat or species and likely to threaten the long-term integrity of the feature. Not reversible or replaceable. Will remain detectable in the medium and long term.
<p>The following definitions have been applied in respect to timescales:</p> <ul style="list-style-type: none"> • Immediate: Within approximately 12 months • Short term: Within approximately 1-5 years • Medium term: Within approximately 6-15 years 	

Level of Impact	Definition
	<ul style="list-style-type: none"> Long term: More than 15 years.

Criteria for Assessing Significance

- 7.7.10 An EclA is undertaken in relation to the baseline conditions that would be expected to occur in the absence of a proposed development and, therefore, may include possible predictions of future changes to baseline conditions, such as environmental trends and other completed or planned developments. Both adverse and beneficial impacts/effects are possible.
- 7.7.11 A significant effect, in ecological terms, is defined as an effect (whether adverse or beneficial) on the integrity of a defined site or ecosystem and/or the conservation status of habitats or species within a given geographical area, including cumulative and in-combination impacts. In accordance with CIEEM guidelines, a significant effect is an effect that supports or undermines biodiversity conservation objectives for IEFs, or for biodiversity in general.
- 7.7.12 The approach adopted in this Chapter aims to determine if the effect of an impact is significant or not based on a discussion of the factors that characterise it, i.e. significant effects encompass impacts on the structure and function of defined sites, habitats or ecosystem and the conservation status of habitats and species (including extent, abundance and distribution). Additionally, significant effects should be determined with reference to an appropriate geographic scale.
- 7.7.13 The predicted significance of the effect has been determined through a standard method of assessment based on professional judgement and a combination of IEF sensitivity and magnitude of change. Significance levels are defined below in **Table 7.5** and **Major and Moderate** effects are considered significant in the context of the EIA Regulations.
- 7.7.14 In accordance with the current CIEEM guidelines, effects of impacts on IEFs are assessed on the basis of standard mitigation and good practice measures (as set out in **Section 7.9**) being in place. Additional mitigation may be identified where it is required to reduce a significant effect: mitigation will be consistent with the geographic scale at which an effect is deemed significant.
- 7.7.15 Any significant effect remaining post-mitigation (the residual effect), together with an assessment of the likelihood of success of the mitigation, are the factors to be considered against ecological objectives (legislation, policy and development control) in determining the application.
- 7.7.16 In addition to determining the significance of effects on valued ecological features, this Chapter also identifies any statutory requirements in relation to wildlife, to ensure legal compliance of the Proposed Development during both construction and operation.

Table 7.5: Significance of Effect

Level of Impact	Definition
Major	Significant effect, as the impact is likely to result in a long term significant negative effect on the conservation status of the feature.
Moderate	Significant effect, as the impact is likely to result in a medium term or partially significant negative effect on the conservation status of the feature.

Level of Impact	Definition
Minor	The impact is likely to have a negative effect on the feature at an insignificant level by virtue of its limited duration and/ or extent, but there will probably be no effect on its conservation status. The level of effect would be Minor and Not Significant.
Negligible	No material effect. The effect is assessed to be Not Significant.

Assessment of Cumulative Effects

7.7.17 The main reason for assessing cumulative impacts is to identify whether effects, which may not be significant from individual developments, are likely to be significant when combined with nearby proposed schemes. These may be additive / incremental (from multiple projects/activities) or synergistic. Cumulative effects are particularly important in EclA as ecological features may already be exposed to background levels of pressure, where further impact may cause irreversible decline or make IEFs more vulnerable or sensitive to change. An assessment of cumulative effects is provided in **Section 7.13**.

7.7.18 Projects at the scoping or pre-application stage are typically scoped out of the cumulative assessment due to insufficient information on the project or likely effects being available. However, some pre-application developments, such as those under the remit of the Applicant that fall within proximity of the Proposed Development, have been considered in the cumulative assessment (see **Chapter 5: EIA Process and Methodology** for further details).

7.8 Baseline Conditions

7.8.1 This section details the results of the desk study and field surveys conducted across the Survey Area and wider ecological context, (see **Section 7.6** for descriptions) which provides the baseline conditions from which the EclA is based.

Desk Study

7.8.2 All external data records presented here are only relevant to non-avian ecology. All external data for ornithological records are included within **Chapter 8: Ornithology** and **Appendix 8.2: Ornithology Baseline Report**.

Statutory Designated Sites

7.8.3 The Proposed Development does not overlap, or intersect, any statutory sites designated for nature conservation. There is one site of International Importance (an SAC), and three sites of National Importance (SSSIs) identified within 10 km of the Proposed Development (see **Figure 7.1a**). Details on these designated sites are presented below in **Table 7.6**. The Internationally designated site is the River Dee SAC, located approximately 2 km north of the Proposed Development at its closest point. However, this site is hydrologically connected to the Proposed Development via the Water of Charr, which forms part of the upper water catchment that feeds into the SAC. The downstream distance is calculated as approximately 2.1 km from the proposed watercourse crossing at approximately NO 61514 80338 (subject to movement under the LoD). The remaining three statutory designated sites are not considered to be functionally connected with the Proposed Development due to the nature of their qualifying features and the distance from the Proposed Development boundary.

Table 7.6: Statutory Designated Sites

Site	Designation	Distance from Proposed Development	Designated features
River Dee	SAC	Approximately 2.1 km North	<ul style="list-style-type: none"> - otter (<i>Lutra lutra</i>) - freshwater pearl mussel (<i>Margaritifera margaritifera</i>) - Atlantic salmon (<i>Salmo salar</i>).
Loch of Lumgair	SSSI	Approximately 7 km southeast	<ul style="list-style-type: none"> - Fens (Basin fen 'schwingmoor' type) - Woodlands (Wet woodland)
Gannochy Gorge	SSSI	Approximately 8 km southwest	<ul style="list-style-type: none"> - Bryophyte assemblage - Lichen assemblage - Beetle assemblage
Eslie Moss	SSSI	Approximately 10 km south	<ul style="list-style-type: none"> - Fens (Basin fen)

Non-statutory Designated Sites

- 7.8.4 The Proposed Development intersects one designated site of local importance, Strathfinella LNCS (see **Figure 7.1b**). This is designated for geological and fluvial geomorphological features, with botanical interest within the Loch at Glensaugh. An additional three sites of local importance are located within 5 km of the Proposed Development. Details on these non-statutory designated sites are presented below in **Table 7.7**.

Table 7.7: Local Conservation Sites

Site	Designation	Distance from Proposed Development	Designated features
Strathfinella	LNCS	Intersects the Proposed Development	Deeply weathered granite and an extensive network of fluvio-glacial meltwater channels. Highland Boundary Fault Complex. Slack of Birnie of botanical interest. The loch at Glensaugh supports good aquatic vegetation.
Elfhill	LNCS	1.5 km northwest	Steep-sided river valley, with semi-natural broadleaved woodland, gorse scrub and acid grassland. Botanical diversity and particularly important for native bluebell (<i>Campanula rotundifolia</i>).
Mergie	LNCS	2.3 km northeast	Neutral and acid grassland, broadleaved and coniferous woodland, wet heath, scrub, bracken, bog, pond, rivers and rush pasture alongside the Cowie Water. Locally important species such as lesser twayblade (<i>Neottia cordata</i>) and bog myrtle (<i>Myrica gale</i>).

Site	Designation	Distance from Proposed Development	Designated features
Feughside	LNCS	4.5 km north	Extensive area of geomorphological interest representing the best part of a more extensive fluvio-glacial complex. Clachnaben is a good example of a granitic tor. Locally rare plants in pine woodland and mire.

7.8.5 Twenty one areas of ancient woodland listed within the AWI were identified within 2 km of the Proposed Development during the desk study (see **Table 7.8** below and displayed on **Figure 7.1b**).

Table 7.8: Ancient Woodland Inventory (AWI) Sites

Site	Woodland Type	Distance from Proposed Development	Size (Ha)
Shoolbraid / Belhangie Woods	Long-Established (of plantation origin)	Intersected by the Proposed Development OHL	135.77
Unnamed (Site ID 21980)	Long-Established (of plantation origin)	Intersected by the Proposed Development Existing Access Track	42.09
Unnamed (Site ID: 21981)	Ancient (of semi-natural origin)	Intersected by the Proposed Development Existing Access Track	2.62
Unnamed (Site ID: 21912)	Ancient (of semi-natural origin)	Intersected by the Proposed Development Existing Access Track	54.72
Garrold Wood	Ancient (of semi-natural origin)	4 m south of Access Track	72.11
Foumart Wood	Long-Established (of plantation origin)	12 m east of Access Track	2.73
Paldyfair Wood	Long-Established (of plantation origin)	86 m south of Access Track	24.52
Unnamed (Site ID: 21982)	Other (on Roy map)	116 m west of Access Track	2.93
Unnamed (Site ID: 22217)	Long-Established (of plantation origin)	299 m southwest of Access Track	3.27
Wood Of Germany	Long-Established (of plantation origin)	314 m east of Access Track	6.62
Unnamed (Site ID: 21983)	Long-Established (of plantation origin)	319 m west of Access Track	0.90

Site	Woodland Type	Distance from Proposed Development	Size (Ha)
Unnamed (Site ID: 22220)	Long-Established (of plantation origin)	370 m southwest of Access Track	0.95
Unnamed (Site ID: 22214)	Long-Established (of plantation origin)	543 m southwest of Access Track	9.66
Unnamed (Site ID: 21911)	Long-Established (of plantation origin)	600 m west of Access Track	31.70
Unnamed (Site ID: 22199)	Long-Established (of plantation origin)	1.2 km south of Access Track	2.17
Unnamed (Site ID: 22200)	Long-Established (of plantation origin)	1.2 km southeast of Access Track	1.06
Unnamed (Site ID: 22192)	Ancient (of semi-natural origin)	1.2 km north of Access Track	11.93
Unnamed (Site ID: 22197)	Long-Established (of plantation origin)	1.3 km southeast of Access Track	2.36
Wood Of Mergie	Long-Established (of plantation origin)	1.5 km northeast of Access Track	42.72
Jacksbank Wood	Long-Established (of plantation origin)	1.5 km southeast of Access Track	2.4
Unnamed (Site ID: 22198)	Long-Established (of plantation origin)	1.7 southeast of Access Track	3.81

Protected and Otherwise Notable Species

7.8.6 The desk study identified fifteen records (from the past 10 years) of protected and / or conservation value species within 2 km of the Proposed Development. The full external data search is detailed in full within **Appendix 7.1: Ecology Desk Study** and includes the following records:

- Mammals: Brown hare, badger, red squirrel, otter, mountain hare, pine marten, wildcat, bat species; and,
- Herptiles: Common lizard (*Zootoca vivipara*), adder (*Vipera berus*) and, toad (*Bufo bufo*).

Field Surveys

Habitats

7.8.7 The results of the UKHab classification and NVC surveys are presented below in **Table 7.9**. The habitats and vegetative communities recorded are also shown in **Figure 7.2: UKHab** and **Figure 7.3: NVC Survey**. These figures illustrate the location and extent of vegetation types recorded within the Survey Area. For a full description of the survey results and detailed figures, please refer to **Appendix 7.2: UKHab and NVC Survey Report**.

7.8.8 A total of eight broad habitat types were recorded within the Survey Area, which are further broken down into their respective UKHab and NVC classifications, where possible, as detailed in **Table 7.9** below.

Table 7.9: Habitat Survey Results

UK Habitat Classification	NVC Community	Conservation Status	Area/Length within Survey Area (ha/km)
<i>Grasslands</i>			
g1 Acid grassland	N/A	LBAP	16.54 ha
g1b6 Other upland acid grassland	N/A	LBAP	17.18 ha
	U5 <i>Nardus stricta-Galium saxatile</i> grassland	LBAP	13.77 ha
	Je <i>Juncus effusus</i> community	LBAP	19.74 ha
g1c Bracken	U20 <i>Pteridium aquilinum – Galium saxatile</i> community.	None	8.35 ha
g3c Other neutral grassland	N/A	LBAP	33.25 ha
g3c7 <i>Deschampsia</i> neutral grassland	MG9 <i>Holcus lanatus – Deschampsia cespitosa</i> grassland	LBAP	0.50 ha
g3c8 <i>Holcus-Juncus</i> neutral grassland	MG10 <i>Holcus lanatus - Juncus effusus</i> rush pasture	LBAP	13.97 ha
g4 Modified grassland	MG6 <i>Lolium perenne - Cynosurus cristatus</i> grassland	None	146.87 ha
	MG7 <i>Lolium perenne</i> leys and related grasslands	None	59.76 ha
<i>Woodland</i>			
w1 Broadleaf and mixed woodland	N/A	None	2.35 ha
w1g Other broadleaved woodland	N/A	LBAP	11.07 ha / 0.26 km
w1h6 Other woodland; mixed; mainly conifer	N/A	LBAP	0.48 ha
w2b Other Scot's Pine woodland	N/A	LBAP	7.90 ha
w2c Other coniferous woodland	N/A	LBAP	501.54 ha
<i>Heathland / Scrub</i>			

UK Habitat Classification	NVC Community	Conservation Status	Area/Length within Survey Area (ha/km)
h1 Dwarf shrub heath	N/A	SBL, LBAP	17.43 ha
h1b Upland heathland	N/A	SBL, LBAP	9.09 ha
h1b5 Dry heaths; upland (H4030)	H10 <i>Calluna vulgaris</i> – <i>Erica cinerea</i> heath	Annex 1, SBL, LBAP	1.67 ha
h1b5 Dry heaths; upland (H4030)	H12 <i>Calluna vulgaris</i> – <i>Vaccinium myrtillus</i> heath	Annex 1, SBL, LBAP	106.04 ha
h2a6 Other native hedgerow	N/A	SBL, LBAP	0.5 km
h3e Gorse scrub	W23 <i>Ulex europaeus</i> – <i>Rubus fruticosus</i> scrub	LBAP	22.97 ha
h3h Mixed scrub	N/A	LBAP	3.84 ha
<i>Wetlands</i>			
f1a Blanket bog	M2 <i>Sphagnum cuspidatum</i> / <i>recurvum</i> bog pool community	SBL, LBAP	Too small to map
f1a Blanket bog	M19 <i>Calluna vulgaris</i> – <i>Eriophorum vaginatum</i> blanket mire	SBL, LBAP	416.12 ha
f1a Blanket bog	M20 <i>Eriophorum vaginatum</i> blanket and raised mire	SBL, LBAP	33.01 ha
f2 Fen, marsh and swamp	S9 <i>Carex rostrata</i> swamp	SBL, LBAP	Too small to map
	N/A	LBAP	2.35 ha
f2c Upland flushes, fens and swamps	M6 <i>Carex echinata</i> – <i>Sphagnum recurvum/auriculatum</i> mire	SBL, LBAP	42.66 ha
f2f Other wetlands	M23 <i>Juncus effusus/acutiflorus</i> – <i>Galium palustre</i> rush-pasture	LBAP	0.75 ha
<i>Arable / Horticulture</i>			
c1 Arable and horticulture	N/A	None	8.03 ha
c1c Cereal crops	N/A	None	33.42 ha
c1f Horticulture	N/A	None	2.40 ha
<i>Urban</i>			

UK Habitat Classification	NVC Community	Conservation Status	Area/Length within Survey Area (ha/km)
u1 Built-up areas and gardens	N/A	None	0.2 ha
u1b Developed land; sealed surface	N/A	None	0.28 ha
u1b5 Buildings	N/A	None	0.10 ha
u1b6 Other developed land	N/A	None	4.60 ha
u1c Artificial unvegetated, unsealed surface	N/A	None	0.33 ha
u1d Suburban mosaic of developed and natural surface	N/A	LBAP	8.20 ha
u1e Built linear feature	N/A	None	30.6 km
<i>Hydrological</i>			
r1 Standing open water and canals	N/A	LBAP	0.03 ha
r1a6 Other eutrophic standing waters	N/A	SBL, LBAP	0.46 ha
r2a Priority rivers and streams	N/A	SBL, LBAP	18 km
r2b Other rivers and streams	N/A	LBAP	12.3 km
<i>Other</i>			
Clearfell	N/A	None	46.96 ha
Area Total			1620.98 ha
Linear feature Total			31.59 km

Invasive Species

7.8.9 No scheduled invasive non-native species were noted during the field surveys. However, the non-native shrub species, snowberry (*Symphoricarpos albus*), which has an invasive nature, was recorded in one location within the east of the Survey Area.

7.8.10 Full details of the survey results are contained within **Appendix 7.1: Ecology Desk Study**.

Protected Species

Bats

- 7.8.11 Full details of the survey results are contained within **Appendix 7.5: Protected Species Survey Report** and survey results are shown in **Figure 7.4**.
- 7.8.12 Habitats within and surrounding the Proposed Development are considered to be of varying suitability for bat usage. The open moorland habitat dominating the western reaches of the Survey Area is generally unsuitable for foraging and commuting bats due to the lack of linear features, and so is unlikely to support significant numbers of foraging and/or commuting bats. In addition, this area of open ground is highly exposed, and void of trees and structures that may offer potential roosting opportunities. Watercourses within this area provide suitable foraging habitat, but these offer limited suitability for use by bats as no riparian woodland is present and the features are highly exposed. There were no PRFs identified within this habitat type.
- 7.8.13 The coniferous plantation dominating the central and eastern reaches of the Survey Area is generally considered to offer limited potential for roosting bats, due to the presence of densely planted coniferous trees, that largely lack maturity and structural habitat to support PRFs. However, where stands are less densely packed and where trees are of greater maturity, suitability for roosting increases. In addition, bats are considered to use plantation forestry for commuting and foraging, as forestry blocks are well connected to wider habitats which may provide more suitable foraging resources. As such, it is considered that bats are likely to utilise the forestry rides and forestry edge habitats.
- 7.8.14 Agricultural lands within the south and eastern reaches of the Survey Area, offer suitable habitat of bats. There are a number of hedgerows, broadleaf woodlands and watercourses intersecting the Survey Area, which are likely to offer commuting and foraging opportunities for bats. This area also provides the greatest potential for roosting bats, with several mature trees presenting features with suitability for roosting.
- 7.8.15 The external PRA identified two structures with high suitability for summer roosting bats, and moderate suitability for hibernating bats. Structure 1 is a concrete tunnel within an agricultural field. The structure consisted of a large chamber with a large access entry point at the southern wall. Structure 2 is a derelict house with multiple entry points via a partially collapsed roof and unglazed windows. Internal surveys of structures were not conducted.
- 7.8.16 Bats are protected as EPS² and are priority species on the SBL¹⁷. The desk study identified records for common bat species including in the wider area including pipistrelles (*Pipistrellus* sp.), Daubenton's (*Myotis daubentonii*), and Natterer's Bat (*Myotis nattereri*). Field surveys identified suitable roosting and commuting / foraging habitat within forestry edge habitats, and hedgerows/ treelines within the Survey Area; however, suitable habitat was not widespread, with many areas within the Proposed Development LoD absent of trees. As such, bat populations within the vicinity of the Proposed Development are unlikely to be present in high numbers. Therefore, bat populations within the context of the Survey Area are considered as **Local Importance**.

Otter

- 7.8.17 Full details of the otter field survey results can be found in **Appendix 7.4: Confidential Otter and Water Vole Survey Report**.
- 7.8.18 Evidence of otter was identified along three of the watercourses in the vicinity of the Proposed Development. These included the Water of Charr; Bervie Water; and Maxie Burn.

7.8.19 Whilst otter are likely to be using watercourses within the Survey Area for foraging and commuting, disturbance primarily associated with agricultural activities (i.e. presence of cattle and farming practices adjacent to watercourses) limits suitability of the watercourses in the Survey Area for otter holts.

7.8.20 Otter are an EPS and as such are considered to be of **Regional Importance**. Otter populations within connecting water bodies to the River Dee SAC are considered of **International Importance** and are assessed under the shadow HRA (see **Appendix 7.7: Shadow HRA**).

Water Vole

7.8.21 Full details of the Water vole field survey results can be found in **Appendix 7.4: Confidential Otter and Water Vole Report**.

7.8.22 Evidence of water vole activity was found along the Slack Burn. No other evidence of water vole was found along the other watercourses within the Survey Area.

7.8.23 The habitats within the Survey Area are considered to be generally unsuitable for water vole and although an area was identified along Maxie Burn with suitable water vole habitat, no evidence was recorded here. Water vole was not returned from desk study records, therefore populations may be disconnected from the Survey Area; however it is noted that such upland watercourses are recognised by NatureScot as important for water vole due to historic persecution and habitat loss in the lowlands and under-recording is possible⁴⁷.

7.8.24 Water vole are listed under the SBL and are considered to be of **Local Importance**.

Badger

7.8.25 Full details of the field survey results and the legislation protecting badger can be found in **Appendix 7.3: Confidential Badger Survey Report**.

7.8.26 Evidence of badger activity was relatively concentrated within agricultural farmland and within woodland edge habitat in the central and eastern areas of the Survey Area. A total of 13 badger setts were identified during field surveys, comprising of both main setts and outliers, in addition to foraging and commuting evidence. As such, badgers are considered to be present throughout much of the Survey Area, favouring woodland and agricultural habitat for foraging and shelter.

7.8.27 Badgers are not listed as an EPS or SBL species and are therefore considered as **Less than Local Ecological Importance**; however, are offered protection under the Protection of Badgers Act 1992⁹. As such are carried forward for assessment in this report.

Scottish Wildcat

7.8.28 Full details of the field survey results and the legislation protecting Scottish wildcat can be found in **Appendix 7.5: Protected Species Survey Report**. No evidence of wildcat was recorded during field surveys; however, as it is known that wildcat are elusive, very difficult to survey and with wide ranging territories, lack of field evidence does not confirm absence. Desk study results are provided in **Appendix 7.1**, which highlight wildcat records within the wider area within suitable habitat i.e. woodland and upland heathland habitat.

7.8.29 Wildcat are protected as EPS and priority species on the SBL. Any populations of Scottish wildcat using habitats within the Survey Area are not considered to be connected to Wildcat Priority Areas, due to distances of 21.73 km to the southwest separated by existing road networks and managed farmland unsuitable to wildcat and posing barriers to wildcat movement. As such, wildcat are considered as **Regional Importance**.

⁴⁷ Capreolus Wildlife Consultancy (2005). The ecology and conservation of water voles in upland habitats. Scottish Natural Heritage Commissioned Report NO. 099 (ROAME No. F99AC320).

Pine Marten

7.8.30 Full details of the field survey results and the legislation protecting pine marten can be found in **Appendix 7.5: Protected Species Survey Report** and **Figure 7.4**. Evidence of pine marten was restricted to the forestry within the eastern areas of the Survey Area. No dens were confirmed; however, commercial forestry is considered to offer suitable habitat for den creation. Pine marten evidence was identified within forestry tracks and forestry rides, signifying the importance of these areas for pine marten for foraging and commuting. In addition, surrounding grassland and moorland habitats provide ample prey and food resource i.e. mice, voles and berries. Testing of scat confirmed positive presence for pine marten.

7.8.31 Throughout the Proposed Development, pine marten presence was limited but individuals are likely to pass through the area for hunting/foraging on a regular basis and places of shelter may be present within forestry.

7.8.32 Pine marten are listed as SBL species, as such are considered as **Local Importance**.

Red Squirrel

7.8.33 Full details of the field survey results and the legislation protecting red squirrel can be found in **Appendix 7.5: Protected Species Survey Report** and **Figure 7.4**. The habitats within the central and eastern areas of the Survey Area offered suitable habitat for red squirrel in the form of coniferous and broadleaf plantation woodland, semi-natural mixed woodland and semi-natural broadleaved woodland. Moorland and agricultural habitats are not considered suitable for red squirrel.

7.8.34 There were two live observations recorded of red squirrel during the field surveys, with individuals sighted crossing existing forestry tracks. A single potential drey was identified in this area although areas of the plantation woodland were dense, making identification of features in the upper canopy challenging. Despite relatively few signs and dreys being identified, it is considered likely that red squirrel are located throughout the majority of the woodland habitats in the Survey Area.

7.8.35 Red Squirrel are listed as SBL species, as such are considered as **Local Importance**.

Other Mammals

7.8.36 Multiple mammal records were collected incidentally throughout the Survey Area during the field survey work. These included live sightings of red deer (*Cervus elaphus*), roe deer (*Capreolus capreolus*), brown hare (*Lepus europaeus*) and field vole (*Microtus agrestis*). Presence of deer pressure was noted throughout the Survey Area utilising upland heathland, forestry, and agricultural lands, with red deer herds primarily observed within the western reaches of the Survey Area, and evidence of roe deer prevalent within forestry areas. Fox (*Vulpes vulpes*) scat and prints were recorded and are assumed to be present throughout the Survey Area; however, they are not offered legal protection and are not of conservation importance. All aforementioned species are considered **Less than Local Importance**.

7.8.37 Full details of the field survey results and the legislation protecting mammals can be found in **Appendix 7.5: Protected Species Survey Report** and **Figure 7.4**.

Herptiles

7.8.38 Full details of the field survey results and the legislation protecting herptiles can be found in **Appendix 7.5: Protected Species Survey Report** and **Figure 7.4**.

7.8.39 The habitat across the Survey Area is suitable for herptiles, with moorland, grassland and forestry rides offering shelter and foraging opportunities. Moorland areas within the west of the Survey Area in particular offer good suitability for foraging, basking and hibernating reptiles. Multiple common lizard and adder observations were recorded incidentally during the field surveys within moorland habitat.

7.8.40 Drainage ditches and ponds were observed throughout the Survey Area offering suitable habitat for amphibians, with frogspawn and common frog recorded within multiple locations.

7.8.41 Populations of Herptiles are considered to be of **Local Importance**.

Future Baseline in the absence of the Proposed Development

7.8.42 In the event that the Survey Area remains undeveloped in the west (excluding the consented Glendye Wind Farm for which the Proposed Development is required, located 1.9 km west of the Proposed OHL), aside from slight variations in populations and the distribution of more mobile species, it is considered likely that the main change would be further erosion and degradation of peatlands in the upper, higher altitude parts of the Proposed Development. This would also lead to a further release of carbon to the atmosphere as the peatlands in the locale continue to degrade further⁴⁸. It is likely there would be a continuation of the moorland estate management practices, including muir burn, and deer pressures also influencing peatland habitats.

7.8.43 A continuation of the commercial forestry in the central and eastern areas of the Survey Area, with evidence of expansion into surrounding habitats, and a continuation of agricultural practices in the south-east, is considered likely, with potential changes due to soil erosion and nutrient enrichment and / or acidification of hydrological features. Forestry blocks will continue to be felled and replanted; however, these changes in conifer plantation habitat are of negligible ecological consequence and do not affect the outcomes of this assessment.

7.8.44 It is considered that habitats within the Survey Area are likely to currently support protected and notable species at or near to its carrying capacity. This means that a net increase in species population numbers would not be expected, should the Proposed Development not proceed.

7.8.45 Other changes over time may occur as a result of climatic change. These are difficult to predict but likely to involve increased precipitation and gradual increases in average temperatures⁴⁹. Some change in the vegetation assemblage is likely to occur as a result, most notably the continued erosion of the peatland in the west leading to reduced species diversity. Further degradation of the peat here is considered likely to lead to continued issues with flash flooding / spate events, due to the peatland being unable to effectively store precipitation and surface water. An increase in flash flooding events may lead to interruptions and degradation of in-stream habitat relied on by qualifying features of the River Dee SAC, but may also causing flooding issues further downstream.

7.9 Design Considerations and Embedded Mitigation

7.9.1 The ecological baseline has been considered throughout the design process for the Proposed Development, including design consultations with specialists' input to subsequent design iterations. This was with an aim to either eliminate or reduce the potential for any significant effects on receptors, in accordance with the mitigation hierarchy^{50,51}. Ecological factors taken into account throughout the development design process included the following:

- Using existing access tracks as far as practicable to reduce the need for new tracks;

48 UK Centre for Ecology and Hydrology: Peatlands Fact Sheet (online) Available at:

<https://www.ceh.ac.uk/sites/default/files/Peatland%20factsheet.pdf> (last accessed 08/10/2025)

49 Intergovernmental Panel on Climate Change (IPCC) Chapter 11: Weather and Climate Extreme Events in a Changing Climate (2023) (online) Available at: <https://www.ipcc.ch/report/ar6/wg1/chapter/chapter-11/> (last accessed 08/10/2025)

50 SSEN Transmission: a Network for Net Zero (2019) (online) Available at: <https://www.ssen-transmission.co.uk/globalassets/documents/a-network-for-net-zero/supporting-evidence/our-approach-to-implementing-biodiversity-net-gain-.pdf> (last accessed 08/10/2025)

51 CIEEM: Good Practise principles for development (2016) (online) Available at: <https://cieem.net/resource/biodiversity-net-gain-good-practice-principles-for-development/> [last accessed 08/10/2025]

- A minimum 20 m buffer for any infrastructure or construction activity around all watercourses, except where watercourse crossings/upgrading works are required. The design process has actively minimised the number of watercourse crossings required for associated infrastructure;
- The avoidance of areas of priority habitats, better quality deeper peat (>1 m) and montane heaths for the location of temporary and permanent infrastructure, as far as practicable;
- The protection of retained habitats including woodland, to minimise impacts as far as practicable; and,
- To minimise potential for impact to potential GWDTEs.

Project Design Assumptions and Embedded Design

7.9.2 In line with current CIEEM guidelines¹⁶¹⁶, the assessment of likely significant effects is carried out on the basis of embedded design and standard good practice measures being in place during construction. The following embedded design measures have been applied to the design or will be applied during Proposed Development construction, to ensure that any effects on IEFs are avoided or reduced:

- Avoidance of areas of deeper peats of higher quality and condition (i.e. areas of modified mire that have undergone restoration treatment and/or of better condition and >1 m depth), habitats of significant conservation value, GWDTEs and consideration of areas with the potential to support protected species in relation to the location of OHL structures and ancillary infrastructure, as far as practicable;
- Use of existing tracks where possible to reduce the footprint of the Proposed Development and to limit the number of new watercourse crossings as far as practicable. Some localised upgrading, including widening, would be required in some areas of existing track for an appropriate running width;
- Where limited and unavoidable works may take place on areas of deeper peat, floating roads (where practicable) will be used to mitigate for potential hydrological impacts on peaty substrates and wider, connected peatland vegetation;
- The presence of potential GWDTEs has informed the Proposed Development layout, which has maximised distances to such sensitive features as far as possible (see above);
- Subject to ground investigation works, there is a commitment to micro siting locations of OHL infrastructure to avoid areas of better condition blanket bog or heath habitat, as far as practicable;
- There is a 100 m LoD associated with the construction of the OHL and 50 m LoD for access tracks, to allow for micro siting of the Proposed Development following ground investigation works. There is a commitment to micro-site construction works around IEFs to avoid and/or reduce negative affects where practicable; and,
- Watercourse crossings will be designed in accordance with best practice measures during the detailed design stage and reviewed by a hydrologist. Any bridges will be clear span where possible, and subject to a Controlled Water Activities (CAR) consents application with SEPA. The Applicant will also consult with Dee District Salmon Fishery Board (DDSF) during this period.

Good Practice Measures

7.9.3 In terms of good practice measures assumed to be in place during construction of the Proposed Development, these include the following:

- The Applicant will appoint a suitably qualified ECoW prior to the commencement of any construction activities. The ECoW will be present and oversee all construction activities where ecological consideration is required, provide toolbox talks to all site personnel with regards to priority species and habitats, as well as undertake monitoring works, oversee the relocation of any stands of nationally important species of plants (i.e. dwarf birch and/or Alpine bearberry) and briefings to relevant staff and contractors as appropriate;

- The ECoW or other suitably qualified and experienced ecologist will carry out pre-construction surveys for relevant protected species. In line with NatureScot guidance⁵², these pre-construction surveys would take place no more than three months before commencing works (including facilitating works such as vegetation clearance). Surveys shall take place no less than six weeks prior to construction to allow time for potential licence applications and thus avoid possible project delays. Follow up pre-construction surveys and checks will then be conducted immediately before works as required;
- The ECoW or other suitably qualified and experienced ecologist would carry out a survey for plant Invasive Non-Native Species (INNS) prior to commencement of works and, if required, update the CEMP with appropriate mitigation measures to prevent the spread of INNS;
- A Species Protection Plan (SPP) will be produced for key target species (as per the recommended mitigation measures referred to for each species in **Appendix 7.3: Confidential Badger Survey Report – Appendix 7.5: Protected Species Survey Report**) and agreed prior to commencement of construction and with implementation as required. Furthermore, the Applicant has developed a series of GEMPs and SPPs in agreement with statutory consultees, including SEPA and NatureScot. These can be found in **Appendix 3.3: General Environmental Management Plans (GEMPs)** and **Appendix 3.4: Species Protection Plans (SPPs)**. SPPs have been prepared for bats, otter, water vole, badger, pine marten, wildcat and reptiles. Mitigation measures outlined in the SPPs include the following:
 - The SPP will detail measures to safeguard protected species known to be in the area and will include pre-construction surveys (complimenting the seasonality of the construction start date), as well as ensuring the use of best practice measures to minimise ecological impact during all construction activities (such as sensitive lighting, sensitively timed vegetation clearance or phased clearance, ramps exiting open excavations, consideration of key foraging areas, etc.);
 - The SPP will describe the process to be followed in the case that new protected or notable species are recorded on site that will therefore also need to be protected during construction works, as well ensuring the implementation of effective toolbox talks to raise awareness of site personnel to sensitive ecological receptors on site; and,
 - Specific attention will be made with respect to wildcat and water vole, due to the potential for these protected species to occur within the locale. These species distributions can vary considerably from year to year and with respect to the Proposed Development it should be assumed that they could be present within any suitable habitat.
- In order to prevent accidental pollution of watercourses and impacts on fish within proximity to the Proposed Development or areas downstream (with particulate matter or other pollutants such as fuel), best practice techniques will be employed. These are outlined in **Chapter 9: Geology, Hydrology and Hydrogeology**. In addition, a robust sedimentation strategy will be employed and set out in the Pollution Prevention Plan (PPP) which will form an integral part of the CEMP (provided in **Appendix 3.5**). The CEMP will be agreed with Aberdeenshire Council, in consultation with NatureScot and SEPA, post-consent and prior to commencement of construction;
- Any requirement for lighting both during construction and maintenance activities once operational, will be limited and sensitively designed to concentrate on working areas only, avoiding any suitable habitat for roosting or foraging bats; and,
- Works near or at any retained native trees or semi-natural woodland would follow guidance in British Standard 5837 (2012) “Trees in Relation to Design, Demolition and Construction – Recommendations” (British Standards Institution, 2012)⁵³. A Habitat Management Plan will be produced for target habitat types to protect, and where relevant, restore habitats that are being retained.

⁵² NatureScot (2024) pre-application guidance for onshore wind farms (online) Available at: <https://www.nature.scot/doc/naturescot-pre-application-guidance-onshore-wind-farms> (last accessed 08/10/2025)

⁵³ British Standards Institution (2012). Trees in relation to design, demolition and construction – Recommendations. BSI. (online) Available at: <https://www.bathnes.gov.uk/sites/default/files/2020-01/BS5837%202012%20Trees.pdf> (last accessed 08/10/2025).

7.10 Potential Impacts

Scoped Out IEFs

- 7.10.1 This section details which ecological receptors are not being taken forward for assessment following the application of the embedded mitigation above.
- 7.10.2 Ecological features of local or higher value are considered IEFs. Furthermore, only those with potential to experience significant effects following the implementation of the embedded and standard mitigation have been taken forward for detailed assessment.

Scoped Out IEFs: Nature Conservation Designations

- 7.10.3 The **River Dee SAC** is hydrologically connected to the Proposed Development via the Water of Charr, which flows north / northeast from the Proposed Development before discharging into the SAC 2.1 km downstream. The Proposed Development would involve a water crossing (between pole structure numbers 181 and 182) to facilitate the construction of OHL infrastructure. The River Dee SAC is designated for the presence of otter, freshwater pearl mussel, and Atlantic salmon. Atlantic salmon are scoped out of further assessment due to impassable barriers downstream), and as such are not considered to be present within the Survey Area. Otter have been recorded within the Survey Area, and watercourses may provide supporting habitat for populations of freshwater pearl mussel; however with the implementation of embedded mitigation, no likely significant effects are anticipated on the features of the SAC and are therefore scoped out of further assessment under the EIA Regulations. Such embedded mitigation measures involve micro-siting commitments, clear span bridge construction, water quality protection measures, and species protection plans.
- 7.10.4 For details on HRA considerations, please see **Appendix 7.7: Shadow Habitats Regulations Appraisal (HRA)**.
- 7.10.5 **Loch of Lumgair SSSI, Gannochy Gorge SSSI, and Eslie Moss SSSI** are designated for flora or invertebrates of conservation value. These sites are located 7 km, 8 km, and 10 km from the Proposed Development respectively. These sites are not functionally connected to the Proposed Development, via direct habitat connectivity, hydrological connectivity, or mobility of species. As such, significant effects from the Proposed Development are very unlikely, and these sites have been scoped out of further assessment.
- 7.10.6 **Strathfinella LNCS** is intersected by the Proposed Development between OHL pole structures 135-128 and 118-114. This site is designated largely for its geological and hydro-morphological significance. The Slack of Birnie within the LNCS is of botanical interest known to support parsley fern (*Cryptogramma crispera*), in addition to Glensaugh Loch, noted for aquatic botanical interest. Habitat surveys did not record any notable or protected flora within the boundary of Strathfinella LNCS within the Survey Area. Best practice mitigation in the form of pre-construction surveys to inform micro-siting, implementation of the habitat management plan and water quality protection measures, will ensure significant effects from the Proposed Development are avoided. As such, this LNCS has been scoped out of further assessment.
- 7.10.7 **Elfhill LNCS, Mergie LNCS, and Feughside LNCS** are designated for the presence of habitats with conservation value. These sites are located 1.5 km, 2.3 km, and 4.5 km from the Proposed Development. Given the static nature of the associated features and the lack of connectivity to the Proposed Development, these designations are scoped out from further assessment.
- 7.10.8 There are 21 woodland areas listed on the **AWI** present within 2 km of the Proposed Development, four of which are located within the boundary of the Proposed Development. Shoolbraid / Belhangie Woods AWI is discussed below in **Table 7.10**, however three unnamed AWI sites (Site ID: 21980, 21981, 21912) will be intersected by access tracks proposed for the Proposed Development. These access tracks are existing forestry tracks within the AWI sites and will not require any upgrading works. As such, there is no risk of

significant adverse effects as there would be no loss of risk of damage to any stands of AWI woodland as a result of the Proposed Development; as such these stands of woodland listed on the AWI are scoped out from further assessment.

7.10.9 The remaining 17 AWI sites that will not result in direct habitat loss arising from the Proposed Development are also scoped out of further assessment.

7.10.10 There are three AWI sites present within close proximity to the Proposed Development, these include Garrold Wood (within 4 m) Foumart Wood (within 12 m) and Paldyfair Wood (within 86 m). Embedded design and best practice mitigation measures involving pre-construction surveys, confirmation of root protection zones identified by an arboriculturist, ECoW presence and the implementation of the habitat management plan will ensure that retained habitats are protected throughout the construction phase. As such, significant effects from the Proposed Development are very unlikely and these sites have been scoped out of further assessment.

Scoped Out IEFs: Habitats and Flora

7.10.11 The habitats present within the Survey Area and their respective areas are presented below in **Table 7.11**.

7.10.12 Several habitats are assessed as low (less than local) ecological value due to either low conservation value, limited species diversity, or high disturbance management practices. Loss of these habitats as a result of the Proposed Development is not considered significant and are therefore scoped these out from further assessment. Habitats scoped out include:

- Bracken g1c / U20;
- Other neutral grassland g3c; *Deschampsia* neutral grassland g3c7 / MG9; *Holcus-Juncus* neutral grassland g3c8 / MG10;
- Modified grassland g4 / MG6; MG7;
- Gorse scrub h3e / W23 *Ulex europaeus*–*Rubus fruticosus* scrub; Mixed scrub h3h;
- Arable and horticulture c1; Cereal crops c1c; Horticulture c1f;
- Other coniferous woodland w2c;
- Artificial habitats including; built-up areas and gardens u1; Buildings u1b5; Other developed land u1b6; Artificial unvegetated, unsealed surface u1c; Suburban mosaic of developed and natural surface u1d; Built linear feature u1e; and,
- Clearfell.

7.10.13 Areas of estimated direct and indirect habitat loss anticipated to occur for all new infrastructure are presented below in **Table 7.11** Owing to the embedded best practice mitigation measures provided in **paragraph 7.9.1** to **paragraph 7.9.3**, habitat loss has been minimised with measures ensuring protection against habitat degradation. These include a watching brief for more sensitive habitats (such as woodland fringes, hedgerows, and mire habitats), implementation of pollution prevention measures, continuous attendance by an ECoW in establishing exclusion zones and safe-working distances, as well as the 100 m micro-siting allowance of OHL infrastructure. It is assumed that those habitats assessed as losing <1 %, or in the case of more sensitive habitats ≤0.1 ha, of the total area found within the Survey Area, can be avoided by micro-siting and are also scoped out from further assessment.

7.10.14 The Proposed Development would intersect linear habitats including water courses and hedgerows; however, there would be no requirement for habitat loss in these areas by way of design mitigation, micro-siting commitments and safe working zones around retained habitats. This includes the following communities and mosaics:

- Acid Grassland g1b; Other upland grassland g1b6 / ; U5 *Nardus stricta-Galium saxatile* grassland; Je *Juncus effusus* community;
- Broadleaf and mixed woodland w1;
- Other woodland; mixed; mainly conifer w1h6;
- Dwarf shrub heath h1;
- Upland heathland h1b;
- Other native hedgerow h2a6;
- Blanket bog f1a / M2 *Sphagnum cuspidatum/ recurvum* bog pool community
- Fen, marsh and swamp f2 / S9 *Carex rostrata* swamp community;
- Upland flushes, fens and swamps f2c / M6 *Carex echinata – Sphagnum recurvum/auriculatum* mire;
- Other wetlands f2f / M23 *Juncus effusus/ acutiflorus – Galium palustre* rush-pasture;
- Standing open water and canals r1;
- Other eutrophic standing waters r1a6;
- Rivers (priority habitat) r2a; and
- Other rivers and streams r2b.

7.10.15 **Potential GWDTEs:** An assessment of potential GWDTEs is provided in **Chapter 9 Geology, Hydrology and Hydrogeology** of this EIA Report. NVC communities identified with potential for groundwater dependency included M6, M23, MG6, MG10, along with UKHab were assessed as ombrotrophic and not sustained by groundwater. However, safeguards to maintain these habitats, including sustaining their surface water flows and preserving water quality, is included as embedded design mitigation and best practice measures within **Section 9.7 of Chapter 9**. In accordance with Step 1 of the relevant SEPA guidance no further assessment is required and GWDTEs are scoped out of further assessment.

7.10.16 **Invasive Species:** No scheduled invasive non-native species were noted during the survey. However, the non-native shrub species, snowberry, which has an invasive nature was recorded in one location. It is possible that invasive species may be introduced into the local environment in the interim period between ecological surveys and commencement of pre-construction works. Best practice measures including pre-construction surveys informing the final CEMP and ongoing biosecurity measures implemented throughout the construction and operational period, will ensure that significant adverse effects are avoided, and as such, invasive species are scoped out from further assessment.

Scoped Out IEFs: Protected Species

7.10.17 **Paragraph 7.9.1 to Paragraph 7.9.3** describes the best practice precautions proposed as embedded mitigation measures to safeguard protected species from significant effects as a result of the Proposed Development. A SPP forms the primary mechanism by which this will be done and will be agreed with key consultees in advance of any construction works commencing. Furthermore, pre-construction surveys for key protected species, as identified during baseline studies, will also be incorporated into the SPPs and subsequent mitigation or licencing procedures (if required).

7.10.18 **Otter:** Otter is a qualifying interest feature of the River Dee SAC, under which status it is assessed with respect to the hydrological connectivity via the Water of Charr. Protected species surveys identified the presence of otter activity at relatively low levels across the Survey Area, with greatest activity associated with the Bervie Water. Evidence suggests otters are moving through the landscape largely for foraging and commuting purposes. No confirmed holts or couches were identified within the operational corridor, but a small number of locations potentially suitable for use by otter as a place of shelter were identified along the Water of Charr, Bervie Water, and Maxie Burn. All infrastructure is buffered from watercourses by a minimum of 20 m, with the

exception of water-crossings. The additional measures ensured by micro-siting commitments and the SPP, complimented by pre-construction surveys, will ensure the avoidance of any significant impacts on otter.

7.10.19 This species is therefore scoped out of further assessment.

7.10.20 **Water vole:** The Survey Area supports some areas of suitable habitat for water vole however evidence was limited. The infrastructure is buffered from watercourses by a minimum of 20 m, with the exception of watercourse crossings. The additional measures ensured by the SPP, complimented by pre-construction surveys, will ensure the avoidance of any significant impacts on water vole. This species is therefore scoped out of further assessment.

7.10.21 **Pine Marten:** Evidence of pine marten was restricted to the commercial forestry within the Survey Area, with evidence of scat along existing forestry tracks confirming utilisation by pine marten for hunting and foraging. Den sites were not confirmed, however places of shelter are present within this area with suitability of plantation woodland and scrub which may support potential den sites. Loss of woodland is proposed as part of the Proposed Development, however measures ensured by the SPP, complimented by pre-construction surveys and the presence of an ECoW during vegetation clearance works, will ensure effective mitigation for the avoidance of any significant impacts on pine marten. In addition, the wayleaves associated with the OHL may provide pine martin with additional foraging opportunities and shelter in fringe habitats amongst dense plantation. This species is therefore scoped out of further assessment.

7.10.22 **Red squirrel:** Red squirrel are present within large blocks of plantation woodland within the central areas of the Proposed Development; no dreys were identified however multiple live sighting and feeding remains were observed. Loss of approximately 49.63 Ha of woodland is proposed as part of the Proposed Development to maintain the operational corridor. However, the measures ensured by the SPP, complimented by pre-construction surveys and the presence of an ECoW during vegetation clearance works, will ensure the avoidance of any significant impacts on red squirrel. This species is therefore scoped out of further assessment.

7.10.23 **Herptiles:** Incidental records were made of common lizard, adder, common frog and frogspawn during field surveys. The measures ensured by the SPP and checks completed by the designated ECoW will ensure the avoidance of any potential impacts to herptiles and will protect any hibernaculum and breeding habitat during the construction phase. In addition, the Proposed Development is outside of the known distribution of great crested newt *Triturus cristatus*, with habitats largely unsuitable⁵⁴ and records absent from the desk study. Species of reptile and amphibian are therefore scoped out of further assessment.

7.10.24 **Bats (Roost Loss / Disturbance):** Features offering bat roost suitability included two structures within the Survey Area and 32 trees. No structures will be demolished as part of the Proposed Development; however, there will be loss of plantation woodland. Dense plantation woodland is largely considered unsuitable for roosting bats; however, fringe habitats and areas of greater maturity and reduced density of planting may contain PRF features. Four trees identified with roost suitability are currently within the Proposed Development operational corridor, with a further 16 trees with roosting potential located within 30 m of the Proposed Development. A 100 m OHL LoD provides opportunities to microsite around PRFs, including the aforementioned trees. This micro siting allowance, and commitment to do so as far as possible, complimented by pre-construction surveys and the presence of an ECoW during vegetation clearance works, will ensure the avoidance of roost loss and mitigate for disturbance impacts. As such, bats are partially scoped out of further assessment. Permanent roost loss associated with access tracks are scoped out, as the Proposed Development will not involve felling at these locations; however the potential for temporary roost disturbance effects remain and are discussed below in **Table 7.10** in relation to ten PRFs within 30 m of access tracks.

54 JNCC (2019) Fourth Article 17 UK Habitats Directive Report (2019): Supporting Information (habitats & species) 2019. (online) Available at: <https://jncc.gov.uk/our-work/article-17-habitats-directive-report-2019/>. (last accessed 08/10/2025)

7.10.25 Bats (Commuting / Foraging Habitat Loss / Lighting Disturbance): The Survey Area is dominated with open upland habitats in the west which are considered to offer limited habitat for foraging / commuting bats. Plantation forestry blocks (in particular forestry fringe habitats), smaller woodland linear areas, scrub habitat, and hedgerows are of greatest significance to bats utilising the wider environs. These areas are assessed as being highly suitable foraging habitat. Habitat loss of linear forestry areas, and hedgerows is avoided, with minimal loss of scrub habitat. Loss of plantation forestry will be required as part of the Proposed Development, where a wayleave will be located either side of the OHL infrastructure. However, as much of this is routed through existing dense plantation blocks, the introduction of a wayleave in this location will open up the forestry areas for development of scrub and heath beneath the OHL. As bats typically use linear features (e.g. woodland edges and forestry rides) to navigate from their roosting sites to their foraging areas⁵⁵, this will provide increased habitat provisions for bats within the environment, resulting in an overall positive impact. Habitat loss effects on foraging / commuting bats are therefore scoped out of further assessment

7.10.26 There will be no overnight lighting requirements for the construction or operation of the Proposed Development, therefore disturbance impacts from lighting are scoped out from further assessment

7.10.27 Aquatic Interests: Atlantic salmon and freshwater pearl mussel are qualifying interest features of the River Dee SAC, under which status they are assessed, in terms of impacts in this assessment (fish and freshwater pearl mussel are scoped out of further assessment as independent ecological features). The main watercourses within the Survey Area are considered to support fisheries potential, most notably the Water of Charr and the Bervie Water. The sensitivity of these watercourses is fully acknowledged: the precautions listed within in **Paragraphs 7.9.1-7.9.3** describe the best practice measures that will be implemented in order to safeguard these watercourses and their protected species from significant effects as a result of the Proposed Development. Additional details on specific pollution and contamination prevention measures can also be found in **Appendix 3.3- SSEN Transmission's GEMPs**.

Scoped In IEFs

7.10.28 The subsequent assessment of effects will be applied to IEFs considered to be of local, regional, national, and international nature conservation value (see **Table 7.8**) that are known to be present within the Survey Area or surrounding area (as confirmed through survey results and consultations outlined above) and with potential for impact from the Proposed Development.

Table 7.10: IEFs scoped in for further assessment

Ecological Feature	Scope in	Ecological Importance
Shoolbraid / Belhangie Woods AWI	There is AWI woodland present within with central area of the Proposed Development. This is Long Established of Plantation Origin (LEPO), and is managed as commercial forestry, therefore is not considered irreplaceable habitat. Despite commercial management this designated site aligns with biodiversity policies regarding woodland retention.	Local
Other broadleaved woodland w1g	Other broadleaved woodland is present within the central area of the Proposed Development; three parcels are located within the Brawliemuir Farm property, two primarily comprised of long-standing beech and one a mix of ash and sycamore adjacent to a property building. Another beech parcel is located along the edge of a plantation conifer woodland near	Local

⁵⁵ Forestry Commission Scotland: FCS Guidance Note 35a: Forest Operations and Bats in Scotland. (online) Available at: https://cdn.bats.org.uk/uploads/pdf/Our%20Work/Forest_operations_and_bats_in_Scotland.pdf?v=1541085227 (last accessed 08/10/2025)

Ecological Feature	Scope in	Ecological Importance
	<p>Bogburn. The largest parcel is the riparian woodland along the Bervie Water, comprising of birch, goat willow, alder and rowan.</p> <p>The riparian woodland present aligns with the LBAP priorities. The remaining woodlands have an inherent value as habitat for a variety of species, including protected species; as such, these habitats are considered to be of local value</p>	
Other Scot's Pine woodland w2b	<p>Other Scot's Pine woodland was recorded in pockets between large areas of Sitka spruce and larch plantations managed by Forestry and Land Scotland (FLS) and is of plantation origin. Species assemblages were dominated by Sitka spruce, followed by larch with occasional pockets of Scot's pine. The ground flora is typically poor with steep slopes, acidic soils and lack of light, often bare needles with occasional scattered broom and gorse scrub.</p> <p>Forested areas are under active management for felling cycles, therefore age classes vary throughout the Study Area.</p> <p>The dominant species, Sitka spruce is a non-native commercial species and as a whole, the habitat is generally species poor. This habitat does not constitute a priority habitat although it does have inherent value as a habitat for flora and fauna and is therefore considered of local value in the context of the Survey Area.</p>	Local
Dwarf shrub heath h1; Upland heathland h1b; Dry heaths; upland (H4030) h1b5 / H10 <i>Calluna vulgaris</i> – <i>Erica cinerea</i> heath; H12 <i>Calluna vulgaris</i> – <i>Vaccinium myrtillus</i> heath	<p>Although heath is degraded in nature, in parts due to historical management (forestry and muir burn) and deer pressures, the dry dwarf heath shrub habitat present aligns with SBL and LBAP priorities. Areas corresponding to Annex I habitat (H4030) is considered as Regional Importance in the context of the Survey Area; while smaller areas of h1 and h1b are mosaic in nature associated with forestry ride, and clearfell regeneration, as such are considered to be of local value in the context of the Survey Area.</p>	Local / Regional
Blanket bog f1a / M19 <i>Calluna vulgaris</i> – <i>Eriophorum vaginatum</i> blanket mire; M20 <i>Eriophorum vaginatum</i> blanket and raised mire	<p>The M19 / M20 blanket mire mosaic occupies a significant proportion of the western development area.</p> <p>The vegetation is modified and has a relatively modest range of species, considered to be primarily as a result of degrading factors, notably draining, burning and deer pressures.</p> <p>Although it is degraded, the blanket bog aligns with SBL and LBAP priorities and is considered to be of regional value, primarily due to its restoration potential to active peat forming peatland.</p>	Regional
Scottish Wildcat	<p>Wildcat have not been identified during field surveys however historical records are known from the central and eastern</p>	Regional

Ecological Feature	Scope in	Ecological Importance
	<p>areas of the Survey Area. Wildcat, if present, are not considered to form part of any wildcat priority area populations; however, as an EPS and SBL feature, wildcat is considered to be of Regional Importance. Loss of woodland is proposed as part of the Proposed Development; however, measures ensured by the SPP, complimented by pre-construction surveys and the presence of an ECoW during vegetation clearance works, will be included as embedded mitigation to avoid impacts on wildcat. Nevertheless, wildcat are scoped in on a precautionary basis following consultation feedback with Aberdeenshire Council.</p>	
<p>Bats – disturbance to roosting bats</p>	<p>The Ground Level Tree Assessment (GLTA) survey identified ten PRF trees within 30 m of the Proposed Development access tracks. Although no PRF trees are currently proposed to be removed, construction noise associated with the Proposed Development may result in temporary disturbance and abandonment of bat roosts during this period. Bat species align with EPS and SBL biodiversity principles, and as such are considered of local importance.</p>	<p>Local</p>
<p>Badger</p>	<p>The protected species survey identified badger setts within close proximity to the Proposed Development. As such, construction noise and human presence associated with the Proposed Development, may result in the disturbance or destruction of setts, therefore triggering licencing requirements. Badger are not EPS or SBL features; however, are scoped in based on their legal protection under the Protection of Badgers Act 1992.</p>	<p>N/A – Legal Obligation</p>

Habitats Regulations Appraisal (HRA)

7.10.29 Given the Proposed Development's proximity and downstream connectivity to the River Dee SAC, a Habitats Regulations Appraisal (HRA) will be required to assess whether the integrity of the European site will be maintained should the Proposed Development proceed. Consideration of HRA implications and the potential for adverse effects on qualifying features is necessary to identify the nature, extent and significance of any adverse effects and, if identified, whether these are likely to impact the integrity of the Natura designated site.

7.10.30 A shadow HRA is presented in full in **Appendix 7.7: Shadow Habitats Regulations Appraisal (HRA)**, where the two Stages of the HRA process are mirrored to help inform the competent authority; Stage 1: screening for Likely Significant Effects (LSE), and Stage 2: Appropriate Assessment (AA), where it is assessed whether there are likely to be adverse impacts on the integrity of a Natura site.

Potential Construction Effects

7.10.31 This section provides an assessment of the likely effects from construction of the Proposed Development upon the scoped-in IEFs.

7.10.32 Potential impacts associated with the construction phase would include:

- Habitat loss or damage (permanent and temporary) due to construction of Proposed Development infrastructure;
- Inadvertent killing or injuring of fauna during vegetation clearance or construction activities;
- Disturbance to fauna due to vehicular traffic, operating plant and the presence of construction workers, machinery and materials; and
- Sedimentation or other accidental pollution of watercourses from construction activities and vehicular traffic.

Ancient Woodland Inventory Sites

7.10.33 **Importance and Conservation Status:** The Shoolbraid / Belhangie Woods AWI is assessed as being of Local importance.

7.10.34 **Impact:** The Proposed Development would result in the loss of 9.96 ha of Shoolbraid / Belhangie Woods AWI for the construction of the OHL and required Operational Corridor. This woodland is classified as LEPO (2b) interpreted as plantation from maps of 1860 and continuously wooded since. Many of these sites have developed semi-natural characteristics over this time; however as this site is continually managed for commercial forestry, felling cycles have limited the development of semi-natural characteristics, particularly the development of ground flora through associated disturbance.

7.10.35 **Magnitude:** The AWI site covers an area of 135.8 ha therefore impact from the Proposed Development will amount to a 7.3 % loss of forestry from this site. Field surveys identified dense tree planting resulting in high shading percentages limiting the development of ground flora in these areas, which have been condition assessed as Poor. Owing to embedded best practice mitigation measures provided in **Paragraph 7.9.1 to Paragraph 7.9.3**, habitat loss will be minimised where possible and measures would be implemented to protect against habitat degradation and introduction of invasive species. This includes a watching brief for more sensitive habitats (such as those that may be found within woodland fringes, or smaller glades and openings along forest rides and firebreaks), pollution prevention measures, continuous guidance of an ECoW establishing exclusion zones and safe-working distances as well as the 100 m micro-siting allowance of OHL infrastructure. Taking those factors into account, the impact magnitude is considered to be Low.

7.10.36 **Significance of Effect:** Given the above consideration of sensitivity and magnitude, and while acknowledging the potential for negative impacts associated with the construction phase whilst taking proposed mitigation measures into account (as per the outline CEMP, see **Appendix 3.5**), effect significance is considered to be **Moderate** adverse and **permanent**. As such the effect of habitat loss on AWI sites is considered **Significant** in the context of the EIA Regulations.

Habitats

7.10.37 Negative impacts on habitats may include direct losses, e.g. permanent land-take for pole foundations, permanent access tracks and other infrastructure; with temporary land-take for temporary access tracks, as well as temporary disturbance of habitats within and adjacent to working areas. Negative impacts on habitats can also be indirect, e.g. through changed hydrological conditions, disrupted grazing levels and habitat fragmentation.

7.10.38 The main negative effect to habitats during the construction stage of the Proposed Development will be direct habitat loss due to the construction of the OHL and associated ancillary works such as tracks. Despite much of the track infrastructure being proposed as temporary, with floating tracks installed where practicable, affected areas will require reinstatement and monitoring post-construction.

7.10.39 For the purposes of this assessment, it is assumed that wetland habitat losses due to indirect drainage effects may extend out to 10 m from infrastructure (i.e. in keeping with indirect drainage assumptions within the carbon calculator (see **Appendix 9.6: Carbon Calculator**)). It is expected that any indirect drainage effects would only impact wetland habitats present within the Survey Area, including blanket bog, wet heathland, flushes and marshy grassland. Although there may be some construction disturbance experienced by the surrounding drier habitats, such habitats are expected to recover in the short term and, as such, no indirect drainage effects are expected to impact or alter the quality or composition of dry habitats. A precautionary 5 m buffer is applied in terms of dry substrates, assuming this will incorporate the working area (and beyond) of the direct footprint of the Proposed Development. Habitats categorised into wetland and dry substrate, are listed below in **Table 7.11**.

7.10.40 **Table 7.11** below, presents the habitat loss calculations for the Proposed Development, with the habitats taken through to assessment in bold. For the purposes of brevity, those habitats with no loss are excluded.

Table 7.11: Estimated Habitat Loss Resulting from the Proposed Development

UK Habitat Classification	NVC Community	Total Survey Extent (ha)	Total Direct Loss area (ha) / % of survey extent		Total Direct + Indirect Loss (ha) / %	
			Perm.	Temp.	Perm.	Temp.
<i>Wetland Habitats – 10 m indirect habitat loss buffer</i>						
Blanket bog f1a	M19 M19b	416.12 / 25.67%	0.44 / 0.11%	2.94 / 0.71%	3.56 / 0.86%	2.94 / 0.71%
	M20 M20b / M23b M20b / M6c	33.01 / 2.04 %	0.02 / 0.06%	0.27 / 0.64%	0.22 / 1.67%	0.27 / 0.64%
	M6c M6c / M20 M6c / M23b	42.66 / 2.63%	0.01 / 0.02%	0.42 / 1.99%	0.21 / 0.49%	0.42 / 1.99%
<i>Dry Habitats – 5 m indirect habitat loss buffer</i>						
Cereal crops c1c	N/A	33.42 / 2.06%	0.45 / 1.35%	0.17 / 0.51%	1.21 / 3.62%	0.17 / 0.51%
Acid grassland g1	N/A	16.54 / 1.02%	<0.01	0.25 / 1.51%	0.02 / 0.12%	0.25 / 1.51%
Other upland acid grassland g1b6	N/A	17.18 / 1.06%	-	0.02 / 0.12%	-	0.02 / 0.12%
	Je	19.74 / 1.22%	0.01 / 0.05%	0.19 / 0.96%	0.08 / 0.41%	0.19 / 0.96%
	U5d / M19b / M23b	13.77 / 0.85%	-	0.37 / 2.69%	-	0.37 / 2.69%

UK Habitat Classification	NVC Community	Total Survey Extent (ha)	Total Direct Loss area (ha) / % of survey extent		Total Direct + Indirect Loss (ha) / %	
			Perm.	Temp.	Perm.	Temp.
	U5d / M23b U5d / M23b / M6c					
Bracken g1c	U20 U20 / MG10	8.35 / 0.52%	0.01 / 0.12%	0.37 / 4.43%	0.91 / 10.9%	0.37 / 4.43%
<i>Deschampsia</i> neutral grassland g3c7	MG9	0.5 / 0.03 %	0.01 / 2 %	<0.01	0.01 / 2 %	<0.01
<i>Holcus-Juncus</i> neutral grassland g3c8	MG10 MG10a	13.97 / 0.86%	0.09 / 0.64%	0.11 / 0.79%	0.27 / 1.93%	0.11 / 0.79%
Modified grassland g4	MG6 MG6a	146.87 / 9.06%	0.42 / 0.29%	1.26 / 0.86%	1.02 / 0.7%	1.26 / 0.86%
	MG7	59.76 / 3.68%	0.23 / 0.38%	0.63 / 1.06%	0.59 / 0.99%	0.63 / 1.06%
Dwarf shrub heath h1	N/A	17.43 / 1.08%	-	<0.01	<0.01	<0.01
Upland heathland h1b	N/A	9.09 / 0.56%	<0.01	0.14 / 1.54%	<0.01	0.14 / 1.54%
Dry heaths; upland (H4030) h1b5	H12 H12a H12a /M19b H12c	106.04 / 6.58%	0.57 / 0.54 %	1.44 / 1.08%	1.38 / 1.30 %	1.44 / 1.08%
Gorse scrub h3e	W23	22.97 / 1.42%	0.04 / 0.17%	0.06 / 0.26%	0.12 / 0.52%	0.06 / 0.26%
Mixed scrub h3h	N/A	3.84 / 0.24%	-	<0.01	<0.01	<0.01
u1b6 Other developed land	N/A	4.60/0.28%	<0.01	<0.01	<0.01	<0.01

UK Habitat Classification	NVC Community	Total Survey Extent (ha)	Total Direct Loss area (ha) / % of survey extent		Total Direct + Indirect Loss (ha) / %	
			Perm.	Temp.	Perm.	Temp.
Other broadleaved woodland w1g	N/A	11.07 / 0.68%	0.46 / 4.16 %	-	0.55 / 4.97 %	-
Other Scot's Pine woodland w2b	N/A	7.90 / 0.49 %	2.11 / 26.71%	0.18 / 2.28%	2.11 / 26.71%	0.18 / 2.28%
Other coniferous woodland w2c	N/A	501.54 / 21.26 %	41.67 / 8.31%	0.45 / 0.09%	41.79 / 8.33%	0.45 / 0.09%

Blanket Bog f1a

7.10.41 **Nature Conservation Value and Conservation Status:** Blanket bog is characterised as vegetation on deep peat (>0.5 m)⁵⁶ fed only by surface or rainwater (i.e. ombrotrophic). It is abundant and particularly dominant as a habitat on more level ground and shallow slopes of the uplands.

M19 *Calluna vulgaris* – *Eriophorum vaginatum* blanket mire

7.10.42 M19 is the typical blanket bog vegetation of high-altitude ombrogenous peats in the wet and cold climate of the uplands of northern Britain. In particular, it occurs on high-level plateaux and broad watersheds, usually above 300 m and is generally confined to deeper peats on flat or gently-sloping ground³⁹. It is typically found on drier peats⁵⁹. Most of the blanket bog located within the Survey Area comes under M19, with heather *Calluna vulgaris* and hare's-tail cottongrass *Eriophorum vaginatum* co-dominant with an understory of *Sphagnum*s such as papillose bog-moss *Sphagnum papillosum*, red bog-moss *Sphagnum capillifolium* and blunt-leaved bog-moss *Sphagnum palustre*, scattered through with cloudberry *Rubus chamaemorus*, deergrass *Trichophorum germanicum* and bog asphodel *Nartheccium ossifragum*. Some patches are drier, with *pleurocarpus* mosses starting to replace the *Sphagnum* species, particularly where degradation has caused haggling.

M20 *Eriophorum vaginatum* blanket and raised mire

7.10.43 M20 mire is characteristic of ombrogenous peats on bogs where certain kinds of treatments have affected the vegetation⁵⁹. It is typically representative of a degraded mire, considered likely to derive from the M19 *Calluna vulgaris* – *Eriophorum vaginatum* community due to grazing and/or burning as well as atmospheric pollution⁵⁹. The M20 blanket bog areas were less frequent than M19, but were recorded throughout the south-west of the survey area in patches. The habitat is a more degraded form of the M19, with heavy dominance of hare's-tail cottongrass, with other higher plants such as purple moor-grass *Molinia caerulea*, cross-leaved heath *Erica tetralix* and heather sparse, but frequent. In most areas *Sphagnum* species cover the ground layer, though some areas are drier with common haircap *Polytrichum commune* and red-stemmed feather-moss *Pleurozium schreberi* frequent. Some areas with more heather scattered through look like a transitional community between the heathery M19 and M20, caused by degradation.

7.10.44 The habitats have been classified under the UKHab classification system as blanket bog due to the presence of peat-forming *Sphagnum* species, categorised to a "Level 4". Efforts to accurately categorise to Level 5 was

constrained by evident historical and active management practices and pressures on site affecting peat conditions. Whilst peat forming *Sphagnum* species were present within the Survey Area, classifications to Annex I are made where bog is observed to support “significant” areas of vegetation that are peat-forming, therefore categorised as ‘active’ according to Joint Nature Conservation Committee (JNCC) criteria⁵⁶. While the blanket bog found in this part of the Survey Area may at least partly align with the description for Annex 1 habitat, it is apparent that there is wide-spread degradation of the peatland as a result of management practices evidenced through areas of muirburn and drainage (i.e. grips and ditches), leading to large areas being hydrologically impaired. Additional trampling and browsing pressure from red deer was also evident. The degradation is further demonstrated with areas of hagged peat exposing bare peat, peat pans, as well as evidence of grazing with dung and pulled up vegetation.

7.10.45 Priority peatland mapping indicates that the western extent of the Proposed Development to within the vicinity of pole 114 are potentially Class 1 & 2 priority peatland, considered nationally important carbon-rich soils, deep peat and priority peatland habitat²⁰. Class 4 peatland is indicated to potentially underly much of the eastern extent of the Proposed Development, including poles 001-008, 014-050, 89-110 and 113. This class is noted to lack dominant priority peatland habitat cover with fragmented occasional areas of habitat and deep peat possibly present⁵⁷. The remaining areas of the Proposed Development are noted to be underlain by mineral soils, with no peat deposits likely.

7.10.46 Although the habitat is recognised as being of significant conservation value and included as Annex 1 habitat, the bog habitats present within the Survey Area are generally not fine examples and are relatively common and widespread in a regional context. Scotland has an estimated 1,759,000 ha of blanket bog most of which is located within the Highland region⁵⁷. Blanket bog M19 community accounts for 416.12 ha / 25.67% within the Survey Area and M20 community represents 33.01 ha / 2.04 %.

7.10.47 **Impact:** Both direct and indirect adverse **temporary** and **permanent** effects are likely on blanket bog during the construction phase. There would be a direct loss of habitat during construction of the Proposed Development and indirect losses through potential drying effects upon neighbouring bog habitats, occurring from the construction period into the operational period.

7.10.48 The Proposed Development would result in a direct loss of 0.44 ha / 0.11% of M19 blanket bog habitat and 0.02 ha / 0.06% of the M20 to the Proposed Development infrastructure. In addition to direct loss, there may be indirect losses associated with the zone of drainage around infrastructure, which would bring the total to 3.56 ha / 0.86% and 0.22 ha / 1.67% respectively.

7.10.49 During the construction phase, there would be an additional direct temporary loss of 2.94 ha (0.71 %) of M19b vegetative community and 0.27 ha (0.27 %) of the M20 vegetative community due to the temporary pole foundation working areas, proposed temporary trackway panels and stone tracks. However, this impact would be reversible within the short-term; with effected habitats reinstated to an original condition.

7.10.50 Additionally, because of the design mitigation employed, indirect impacts are unlikely to truly extend out to 10 m. This is likely to reduce the potential indirect impacts considerably by way of maintaining hydrological flow throughout the peat macrotope. The adoption of standard good practice and environmental management techniques, as well as an appropriate and considered drainage design and the utilisation of temporary floating tracks would further reduce the risk of impacts on blanket bog. Micro-siting allowance would be used, where

⁵⁶ JNCC, 2008. (Ed. Maddock.A). UK Biodiversity Action Plan priority habitat descriptions (updated in 2011) (online) Available at: <https://data.jncc.gov.uk/data/2728792c-c8c6-4b8c-9ccd-a908cb0f1432/UKBAP-PriorityHabitatDescriptions-Rev-2011.pdf> (last accessed 08/10/2025)

⁵⁷ JNCC (2019). European Community Directive on the Conservation of Natural Habitats and of Wild Fauna and Flora (92/43/EEC). Fourth Report by the United Kingdom under Article 17 on the implementation of the Directive from January 2013 to December 2019. Conservation status assessment for the habitat: H7130 - Blanket bogs. United Kingdom. Scotland. Joint Nature Conservation Committee, Peterborough.

appropriate, such as around areas of deeper peat and priority peatland habitat, under the supervision of the appointed ECoW to avoid areas of specific, more sensitive communities.

7.10.51 **Magnitude:** When considering the total impact of direct and indirect loss of both blanket bog communities (3.78 ha), the magnitude of impact within the local context (0.84%) and national context (0.0002%) is considered to be of **Low extent** and **permanent**.

7.10.52 **Significance of effect:** Whilst the habitat is assessed of Regional importance, given the above consideration of magnitude with the habitat loss on site representing 0.0002% of Scotland's blanket bog resource, the effect significance is considered to be **Minor** adverse and **Not Significant** under the terms of the EIA Regulations.

Dry heaths; upland (H4030) h1b5

7.10.53 The Dry heaths; upland (H4030) h1b5 habitat with H12 *Calluna vulgaris*–*Vaccinium myrtillus* heath covers 106.04 ha / 6.58 % of the Survey Area, primarily in the western region of the Proposed Development. H12 is included in the priority habitat description for European Dry Heath Annex 1 habitat and is also included within the SBL as upland heathland.

H12 *Calluna vulgaris* – *Vaccinium myrtillus* heath

7.10.54 *Calluna-Vaccinium* heath occurs over a wide variety of siliceous rocks, including sandstone, granite, or on drift and gravel derived from acid rock. The soils are mainly moist but free-draining, nutrient-poor, acid podsols, but the community can also occur on brown earths and brown podsol soils. H12 heath occurs between 200 m and 600 m, on sun-exposed slopes, hillsides, crags, ledges, among scree and boulders, and on the sides of ravines.

7.10.55 **Impact:** The Proposed Development would result in a permanent (direct and indirect) loss of 1.38 ha / 1.30 % as a result of the pole locations, proposed permanent tracks, and CSE hardstanding required. A temporary (direct and indirect) loss of 1.44 ha / 1.08% is expected due to the temporary pole foundations, proposed temporary trackway panels and stone tracks.

7.10.56 **Magnitude:** Scotland has a best single value estimate of 479,000 ha of dry heath⁵⁸. This estimate is, however, acknowledged to be derived through the extrapolation of a limited amount of data. The H12 heath is a community of generally acidic substrates, on free draining soils dominated by heather and other ericoids. The habitat is common and widespread within Scotland. Within the Survey Area, the areas of dry heath are degraded in sections due to historical management (forestry and muir burn) and deer pressures.

7.10.57 As such, when considering the relatively small areas of permanent habitat loss (1.38 ha), the magnitude of impact within the local context (1.30%) and national context (0.0003%) is considered to be **low extent** and **permanent**.

7.10.58 **Significance of effect:** The sensitivity of the receptor is considered to be regional and given the above consideration of magnitude with the total loss on site accounting for 1.30% of the local resource and 0.0003% of the national resource of dry heath, the effect significance is considered to be **Minor** adverse and **Not Significant** under the terms of the EIA Regulations.

Dwarf shrub heath h1; Upland heathland h1b;

7.10.59 Dwarf shrub heath h1 and Upland heathland h1b heath covers 17.43ha / 1.08% and 9.09ha / 0.56% respectively and are considered Local Importance.

⁵⁸ JNCC (2019). European Community Directive on the Conservation of Natural Habitats and of Wild Fauna and Flora (92/43/EEC). Fourth Report by the United Kingdom under Article 17 on the implementation of the Directive from January 2013 to December 2019. Conservation status assessment for the habitat: H4030 - European dry heaths. United Kingdom. Scotland. Joint Nature Conservation Committee, Peterborough.

- 7.10.60 **Impact:** The Proposed Development would result in a permanent (direct and indirect) loss of <0.01ha / 0% of h1 and a h1b habitats as a result of the pole locations, proposed permanent tracks, and terminal pole hardstanding required. A temporary (direct and indirect) loss of <0.01 ha / 0% and 0.14ha / 1.54% is expected for h1 and h1b habitats respectively, due to the temporary pole foundations, proposed temporary trackway panels and stone tracks.
- 7.10.61 **Magnitude:** Scotland has a best single value estimate of 479,000 ha of dry heath⁵⁹. This estimate is, however, acknowledged to be derived through the extrapolation of a limited amount of data. The habitat is common and widespread within Scotland with the loss associated with the Proposed Development considered Negligible and temporary.
- 7.10.62 **Significance of effect:** The sensitivity of the receptor is considered to be of local importance and given the above consideration of magnitude with the total loss on site, the effect significance is considered to be **Negligible and Not Significant** under the terms of the EIA Regulations.

Other broadleaved woodland w1g

- 7.10.63 **Sensitivity:** The Other broadleaved woodland w1g habitat is situated primarily within the centre of the Proposed Development. A parcel of beech woodland is located under the wayleave along pole 84 to 86. The largest parcel of this habitat comprises the riparian woodland found along the Bervie Water, which intersects the Proposed Development between poles 72 and 73. A proposed permanent track is located along the north-east of this habitat leading to poles 70 – 72. Two woodlands, one comprising of ash and sycamore, and the other long-standing beech, are located adjacent to access route leading to pole 45. The access route adjacent to the woodlands is comprised of an existing field track to be upgraded. Just 0.6 km east, is another plantation parcel of woodland adjacent to a permanent proposed track, leading to poles 36 to 40.
- 7.10.64 **Impact:** The Proposed Development will result in a combined direct and indirect permanent loss of 0.55 ha / 4.97 % due to the pole locations, proposed permanent tracks, and required wayleave. In practice though, the positioning and design of the permanent track and upgrades, with adoption of standard good practice and environmental management techniques, would minimise any direct and indirect damage to these woodland habitats.
- 7.10.65 **Magnitude:** The Other broadleaved woodland w1g constitutes a small extent of the Survey Area 11.07 ha / 0.68 %. Within the North East of Scotland, there is approximately 50,160 ha of native woodland. Therefore, the loss of 0.55 ha / 4.97 % of woodland locally and 0.001% regionally is considered to be of **low extent**.
- 7.10.66 **Significance of effect:** The Other broadleaved woodland w1g is assessed as local importance and the magnitude of loss is considered to be low in extent; therefore, the effect significance is considered to be **Minor** adverse and **Not Significant** under the terms of the EIA Regulations.

Other Scot's Pine woodland w2b

- 7.10.67 The Other Scot's Pine woodland w2b is located centrally along the Proposed Development. A parcel lies underneath the wayleave surrounding pole 73 and a proposed temporary trackway is planned through the woodland. The remaining parcels lie east under the wayleave surrounding poles 65 to 68. Temporary trackway panels are planned throughout the woodland, with the existing forestry track due to be upgraded.
- 7.10.68 **Impact:** The Proposed Development would result in a combined direct and indirect permanent loss of 2.11 ha / 26.71% of this habitat type as a result of the pole locations and required wayleave. Through micro-siting and the adoption of standard good practice and environmental management techniques, the direct and indirect

⁵⁹ JNCC (2019). European Community Directive on the Conservation of Natural Habitats and of Wild Fauna and Flora (92/43/EEC). Fourth Report by the United Kingdom under Article 17 on the implementation of the Directive from January 2013 to December 2019. Conservation status assessment for the habitat: H4030 - European dry heaths. United Kingdom. Scotland. Joint Nature Conservation Committee, Peterborough.

impact to the woodlands would be reduced. The habitat currently is species poor due to presence of non-native species and light-reduction caused by the canopy. A reduction in canopy, due to the wayleave, may prosper the colonisation of new ground-flora. Compensatory planting of native species within the Survey Area would offset the loss and provide a greater ecological value habitat than what is currently present.

7.10.69 **Magnitude:** The Other Scot's Pine woodland habitat constitutes a small extent of the Survey Area, 7.90 ha / 0.49 %, and regionally 0.016%. Whilst there is a greater loss locally, of 26.71%, the local woodland constitutes a small extent of the Survey Area and is of limited value. Regionally, the loss equates to 0.004%. This is considered to be of **low extent**.

7.10.70 **Significance of effect:** The woodland is of local importance, and the magnitude of loss is considered to be low in extent and **permanent**; therefore, the effect significance is considered to be **Minor** adverse and **Not Significant** under the terms of the EIA Regulations.

Scottish Wildcat

7.10.71 **Impact:** Scottish wildcat were not identified during field surveys, however as the desk study identified previous records of individuals using the forestry, there is a risk of negative effects during the construction of the Proposed Development, should wildcat become established in the locale. Negative impacts on wildcat may include direct disturbance and habitat losses of den and foraging habitat, and accidental killing or injury to individuals during vegetation clearance works or vehicle use.

7.10.72 Accidental destruction of den sites and / or injury to wildcats would be avoided by embedded design and mitigation measures. **Paragraph 7.9.1 to Paragraph 7.9.3** describes the best practice and reasonable precautions that would be in place to safeguard wildcats from significant effects as a result of the Proposed Development. A SPP forms the primary mechanism by which this would be done and would be agreed with key consultees in advance of any construction works commencing. Furthermore, pre-construction surveys for key protected species, including wildcat, as identified during baseline studies, would also be incorporated into the SPPs, with subsequent mitigation or licencing procedures (if required).

7.10.73 **Magnitude:** The Proposed Development would result in the loss of 49.63 ha of planted conifer and native woodlands and has potential to result in a temporary displacement of wildcat (assuming presence in these habitats) during vegetation clearance and the construction phase. As wildcat can travel up to 10 km per night and may disperse a long way from their natal dens, with subadult males being known to disperse up to 55 km before establishing their own territory (Scott *et al.*, 1993)⁶⁰, this habitat loss is not considered to form a significant proportion of possible wildcat territories. Recent studies suggest that wildcat home ranges may be between 5 and 30 km (Kilshaw *et al.*, 2023)⁶¹. Furthermore, a very small proportion of this habitat loss will result in permanent hard standing associated with access tracks and OHL infrastructure; however this is considered **low in extent**. Upon revegetation, the operational corridor will provide areas with potential to be used as hunting grounds and possible den sites for wildcat.

7.10.74 **Significance of Effect:** Given the above consideration of sensitivity and magnitude, and while acknowledging the potential for negative impacts associated with habitat loss and mortality risk given the proposed mitigation measures (as per the SPP, see **Appendix 3.4: Species Protection Plan**) effect significance is considered to be **minor** adverse, **short-term** temporal and **Not Significant** under the EIA Regulations.

Roosting Bats

7.10.75 **Impact:** The GLTA survey identified ten PRF trees within 30 m of the proposed access tracks associated with the Proposed Development. Although no PRF trees are currently proposed to be removed as a result of the

⁶⁰Scott, R., Easterbee, N. & Jefferies, D. A radio-tracking study of wildcats in western Scotland. Proc. seminar on the biology and conservation of the wildcat (*Felis silvestris*), 1993 Nancy, France. Council of Europe, Strasbourg, 94-97.

⁶¹Kilshaw, K., Campbell, R.D., Kortland, K. and Macdonald, D.W (2023). Scottish Wildcat Action final report: Ecology. NatureScot, Inverness.

Proposed Development, there is potential for temporary disturbances and abandonment of potential roosts due to works in the vicinity.

7.10.76 Vegetation clearance would be highly localised around proposed access track routes, and along the OHL route to allow for creation of the operational corridor in areas of woodland. The LoD would allow for micro-siting to avoid the loss of PRF trees where possible; however, there is the potential that some of the five trees categorised as PRF-M (potential to support multiple bats), the nine categorised as PRF-I (potential to support individual bats), and the five trees categorised as FAR could be impacted as a result of the proposed works by construction disturbance.

7.10.77 **Magnitude:** Although no PRF trees are currently proposed to be removed as a result of the construction of access tracks, there is potential for temporary disturbances on potential roosts i.e. from increased noise / vibration works, additional human presence. Construction works would be undertaken during daylight hours, when bats would be present at roosting sites. Existing access tracks may require surface upgrades in sections to allow construction vehicle access, therefore resulting in a temporary increase in ambient noise levels during this period. In addition, construction vehicles would be utilising these routes throughout the 30-month construction programme. Although a 30-month construction programme in its entirety, due to the linear nature of the Proposed Development, construction activities in different sections of the Proposed Development would be phased to facilitate works effectively and to limit disturbance. As such, the time period for potential impacts would be less than 24 months, with a temporarily increased use of tracks by construction traffic during this time. However, where access tracks currently exist, roosting bats (if present) would be habituated to a degree of traffic from forestry operations and farm practices, therefore if roosting in surrounding trees, bats are considered to be less sensitive to temporary noise disturbance. In addition, tree roosts are considered to be used transiently by bats, where individuals may move between roosts frequently, and as such bats using these habitats may be more resilient to local roost disturbances. As such, the magnitude of potential impact, would be **short term** and **temporary**.

7.10.78 **Significance of Effect:** Given the above considerations into the potential for roost disturbance, while tree roosts are often used transiently by bat species, there remains potential for bat roosts occurring within the LoD which could experience temporary disturbance and displacement effects. The embedded standard mitigation of pre-construction survey and appointment of an ECoW to conduct additional aerial tree inspection surveys (of any trees within 30 m of the Proposed Development), means that impacts on any identified roosts would be avoided or suitably mitigated. Licensing from NatureScot would also be sought where necessary, including the provision of alternative artificial roosting sites (bat boxes), if impacts cannot be avoided. As such, there would be a **Negligible** effect on roosting bats due to disturbance from construction activities, which is **Not Significant** in the context of the EIA Regulations.

Badger

7.10.79 **Impact:** Several badger setts were identified during field surveys, with six setts identified within 30 m of the Proposed Development. Of these, three are identified as potential main setts, one subsidiary, one outlier, and one defunct. NatureScot advise that disturbance of badgers occupying a sett can occur up to 30 m from typical construction works, this being extended up to 100 m for more disruptive activities such as piling and blasting⁶². Despite the embedded design commitment to micro-siting, it is considered likely that a number of setts may require permanent or temporary closure to facilitate the construction of the Proposed Development, which may displace badgers. Negative impacts on badger may include direct habitat loss of established setts, loss of foraging / commuting habitat, temporary disturbance / displacement, and accidental killing or injury to individuals during vegetation clearance works or vehicle use.

⁶² NatureScot (2024). Badgers: licences for development. (online) Available at: <https://www.nature.scot/professional-advice/protected-areas-and-species/licensing/species-licensing-z-guide/badgers/badgers-licences-development> (last accessed 08/10/2025).

7.10.80 Accidental destruction of setts and / or injury to badgers if present within setts would be avoided by embedded design and mitigation measures. **Paragraph 7.9.1 to Paragraph 7.9.3** describes the best practice and reasonable precautions that would be implemented to safeguard badgers from significant effects as a result of the Proposed Development. A SPP forms the primary mechanism by which this would be done and would be agreed with key consultees in advance of any construction works commencing. Furthermore, pre-construction surveys for badger, as identified during baseline studies, would also be incorporated into the SPPs, with subsequent mitigation or licencing procedures (if required).

7.10.81 **Magnitude:** Where badger setts would require permanent closure, the resulting effect would be **permanent**. Habitat loss and fragmentation is considered to be **temporary** in nature, with loss of woodland to be revegetated by scrub and heath habitats, which once established, would offer suitable habitat for the species. Permanent habitat loss associated with construction of the Proposed Development is considered to be **Negligible**.

7.10.82 **Significance:** The impact of temporary or permanent habitat loss during construction would be **Negligible** for badgers considering the large amount of adjacent habitat that would still be available for new sett establishment, foraging, and commuting purposes. The impact of habitat loss for badgers is therefore **Not Significant** in the context of the EIA Regulations.

7.10.83 In a worst-case scenario due to their presence within the LoD, the Proposed Development may result in the closure of up to five setts; however, this is subject to change within the limits of the LoD. Where setts are at risk of disturbance but not of being fully destroyed, sett closure would be temporary. However, where sett destruction is required, this would be a permanent impact. Notwithstanding legal obligations, badgers are a common species in the region and are highly mobile species often utilising several setts within a clan territory. The legal requirements of licensing approvals for main sett loss would require proportional compensatory artificial sett provision. Therefore, any worse-case resultant reduction in the badger population would likely be **short-term**, as would the establishment of new setts considering the resilience of this species and the widespread availability of suitable habitat in the region. For these reasons, the ecological consequence of sett loss is overall considered to amount to a **Minor Adverse**, temporary and medium-term effect of, which in the context of this EIA is **Not Significant**.

7.10.84 Temporary and / or permanent access tracks would not present a barrier to badger movement and so there would be **No effect** on badger movement as a result of track construction, the effects of which are therefore **Not significant** (particularly given that badgers are largely nocturnal whilst the works will be primarily undertaken during daylight). The implementation of the SPP will ensure measures are put in place to avoid any accidental killing/injury or entrapment of badgers that encounter works/equipment if foraging or commuting overnight.

Potential Operational Effects

7.10.85 Potential impacts associated with the operation phase would include:

- Disturbance following routine maintenance of OHL infrastructure; and,
- Maintenance of OHL operational corridor.

Ancient Woodland Inventory Sites

7.10.86 Habitat loss impacts associated with the removal of AWI woodland (LEPO) would be experienced throughout the operational period due to the maintenance of the operational corridor, however as the impact would take place during the construction period and is considered permanent, the impact assessment is provided in **Paragraph 7.10.33 to Paragraph 7.10.36**.

Habitats

7.10.87 Habitat loss impacts associated with the Proposed Development would be experienced throughout the operational period due to the maintenance of the operational corridor, however as the impact would take place during the construction period, the impact assessment is provided in **Paragraph 7.10.37** to **Paragraph 7.10.70**. No additional impacts to habitats are anticipated during the operational period.

Scottish Wildcat

7.10.88 **Impact:** Potential impacts associated with Proposed Development operation are restricted to disturbance from maintenance of the OHL infrastructure, resulting in localised and temporary increases in human presence and vehicular traffic, and occasional vegetation trimming for the operational corridor. No barriers to wildcat movement are predicted during the operational phase as wildcat populations would be able to move freely across the operational corridor once operational.

7.10.89 Habitat loss impacts associated with the removal of woodland would be experienced throughout the operational period due to the maintenance of the operational corridor. However, revegetation of scrub / heathland mosaics within these areas is anticipated. Upon revegetation, the operational corridor would provide areas with potential to be used as hunting grounds and possible den sites for wildcat, therefore loss impacts are considered low in extent.

7.10.90 **Magnitude:** The occasional increases in human presence during maintenance requirements will be localised, infrequent, **temporary** and **short-term**.

7.10.91 **Significance:** Woodland areas within limits of the Proposed Development are managed under ongoing commercial forestry practices, therefore any populations of wildcat using these areas would be habituated to a degree of human disturbance. Considering the infrequent and temporary nature of operational impacts, disturbance impacts are considered to be **Negligible**, and **Not Significant** in the context of the EIA Regulations.

Roosting Bats

7.10.92 **Impact:** Potential impacts associated with Proposed Development operation are restricted to maintenance of infrastructure resulting in localised and temporary increases in human presence and vehicular traffic, and occasional vegetation trimming for the operational corridor. No barriers to badger movement are predicted during the operational phase due to absence of permanent overnight lighting across the Proposed Development. Temporary tracks required for the construction phase would be restored to baseline vegetation types during the operational phase, therefore no impacts to roosting bats are predicted at these locations.

7.10.93 **Magnitude:** The occasional increases in human presence during maintenance requirements would be infrequent, **temporary** and **short-term** and therefore low in extent.

7.10.94 **Significance:** Areas within limits of the Proposed Development are managed under ongoing commercial forestry practices and agricultural practices, and therefore any populations of roosting bats in these areas would be habituated to a degree of human disturbance. Considering the localised, infrequent and temporary nature of operational impacts, disturbance impacts are considered to be **Negligible**, and **Not Significant** in the context of the EIA Regulations.

Badger

7.10.95 **Impact:** Potential impacts associated with operation of the Proposed Development are restricted to maintenance of the OHL infrastructure resulting in increases in human presence and vehicular traffic, and occasional vegetation trimming for the operational corridor. No barriers to movement are predicted during the

operational phase. Temporary tracks required for the construction phase would be reinstated during the operational phase, therefore no impacts are predicted at these locations.

7.10.96 **Magnitude:** The occasional increases in human presence during maintenance requirements will be localised, infrequent, **temporary** and **short-term** and therefore considered to be **low** in extent.

7.10.97 **Significance:** Areas within limits of the Proposed Development are managed under ongoing commercial forestry practices and agricultural practices, and therefore any populations of badger using these areas would be habituated to a degree of human disturbance. Considering the localised, infrequent and temporary nature of operational impacts, disturbance impacts to badger are considered to be **Negligible**, and **Not Significant** in the context of the EIA Regulations.

7.11 Additional Mitigation and Compensation

Ancient Woodland Inventory Sites

7.11.1 Compensatory planting would be required to compensate for the loss of AWI woodland (LEPO) from construction and operation of the Proposed Development. The details and locations of the compensatory planting areas are yet to be confirmed and would be determined post consent within a compensatory planting plan (see **Appendix 11.4: Compensatory Planting Management Strategy**). This would aid in meeting the Scottish Government's Control of Woodland Removal Policy (CoWRP) objective of no net loss of woodland²⁴.

Habitats

7.11.2 An outline Biodiversity Enhancement Plan is provided within **Appendix 7.6 Outline Biodiversity Enhancement Plan**. Where possible on-site enhancements of habitat would be incorporated, for example under wayleaves. As a result of the limited on-site opportunity, off-site biodiversity enhancement opportunities are being explored at locations remote from the Proposed Development but within the Aberdeenshire Council area in line with the policy commitments of the Applicant and expected planning requirements. Discussions are being advanced with potential biodiversity net gain (BNG) partners (site owners/project developers) and sites are being evaluated based on their location and potential to provide biodiversity enhancements for the area. The sites that are shortlisted for further assessment will be surveyed by environmental contractors using the SSEN Transmission Toolkit to measure their BNG potential. BNG partners will also be assessed, and due diligence will be undertaken of potential projects prior to the agreement of heads of terms with BNG partners. Contracts with partners will not be agreed however, until planning consent for the Proposed Development has been granted.

7.11.3 The chosen BNG sites will adhere to the Applicant's key BNG goals and SSEN's commitment to a 10% net gain in biodiversity, namely, to compensate for losses through habitat creation and enhancement, to collaborate with landowners, partners and consultants and to positively impact biodiversity within the Aberdeenshire Council area.

Scottish Wildcat

7.11.4 A SPP will form the primary mechanism by which mitigation measures for wildcat will be detailed and adhered to. An outline SPP is provided in **Appendix 3.4: Species Protection Plan** which will be updated prior to the construction of the Proposed Development and will be agreed with key consultees in advance of commencement of construction. Furthermore, pre-construction surveys for protected species including wildcat, as identified during baseline studies, will also be incorporated into the SPPs and subsequent mitigation or licencing procedures (if required) will be implemented. Additional measures, which will be brought into the final SPP, are also outlined below.

- Engagement with the Saving Wildcats Scotland team where possible to obtain and share data on collared wildcats to further aid micro-siting of the Proposed Development. The Saving Wildcats team will also have extensive local knowledge on the distribution of any potential uncollared cats from previous surveys

undertaken throughout the region. The results of this data sharing would likely influence the detailed design of any further survey approach, to inform the final SPP;

- Targeted camera trapping of key areas for the Proposed Development infrastructure and associated access tracks is required i.e. existing woodland habitat which will be felled. Camera traps shall be 1-1.5 km apart in suitable areas, and in place for a minimum of 8-10 weeks in line with successful studies within the Cairngorms National Park⁶³;
- If wildcat dens are identified during camera trapping and pre-construction surveys, disturbance buffers will be determined and timing restrictions confirmed to ensure the avoidance of accidental disturbance to the suitable habitat during the wildcat breeding season (April to August inclusive) when wildcats are at their most sensitive to disturbance⁶⁴; and
- If following the ongoing monitoring, it becomes apparent that there is a risk of disturbance to wildcat places of shelter, then early consultation with NatureScot would take place to ensure that sufficient information has been collected to inform any application for the appropriate licence.

7.11.5 Suitable measures for protection of wildcat shall be included within the final SPP to be secured by way of a suitably worded condition.

Bats

7.11.6 A SPP will form the primary mechanism by which mitigation measures for bats will be detailed and adhered to. An outline SPP is provided with **Appendix 3.4: Species Protection Plan** which will be updated prior to the construction of the Proposed Development and will be agreed with key consultees in advance of any construction works commencing. Furthermore, pre-construction surveys for protected species, as identified during baseline studies, will also be incorporated into the SPPs and subsequent mitigation or licencing procedures (if required). Additional measures, which will be brought into the final SPP, are also outlined below.

7.11.7 As proposed access tracks are located within close proximity to potential bat roosts, disturbance protection buffers are required. **Table 7.12 below** outlines the required protection zones for different construction activities (adapted from Shawyer, 2011⁶⁵).

Table 7.12: Required Disturbance Protection Zones

Predicted Level of Disturbance	Example Site Activities	Minimum Protection Zone
Low	<ul style="list-style-type: none"> • Pedestrian movement; • Storage of materials; • Fencing (via manual instillation); and • Artificial lighting (not directed towards potential roost feature). 	10 m
Moderate	<ul style="list-style-type: none"> • General building and landscaping works – laying of concrete, bricks, roofing etc. using mechanised plant. 	15 m

63 Kilshaw, K. et al. (2015) 'Detecting the elusive Scottish wildcat *Felis silvestris silvestris* using camera trapping', *Oryx*, 49(2), pp. 207–215. doi:10.1017/S0030605313001154.

64 NatureScot: Wildcat Legislation note for keepers of gamebird and pens and poultry (online) Available at: <https://www.nature.scot/doc/wildcat-legislation-note-keepers-gamebird-pens-and-poultry> (last accessed 08/10/2025)

65 Shawyer (2011) Barn owl *Tyto alba* survey methodology and techniques. (online) Available at: <https://cieem.net/resource/barn-owl-survey-methodology-and-techniques-for-use-in-ecological-assessment/> (last accessed 08/10/2025)

Note this reference relates to barn owl (*Tyto alba*) mitigation; however, the reasoning behind the size of disturbance buffers is considered applicable to bats also, and similar bat disturbance buffers have been accepted by NatureScot on other schemes.

Predicted Level of Disturbance	Example Site Activities	Minimum Protection Zone
High	<ul style="list-style-type: none"> Heavy construction works – ground levelling, pile driving (incl. pile driven fence posts), use of compacting roller etc. using heavy plant. 	30 m

Badger

7.11.8 A SPP will form the primary mechanism by which embedded mitigation measures will be detailed and adhered to. An outline SPP is provided with **Appendix 3.4: Species Protection Plan** which will be updated prior to the construction of the Proposed Development and will be agreed with key consultees in advance of any construction works commencing. Furthermore, pre-construction surveys for protected species, as identified during baseline studies, will also be incorporated into the SPPs and subsequent mitigation or licencing procedures (if required). No additional measures are required.

7.12 Residual Effects

Construction and Operation

Ancient Woodland Inventory

7.12.1 Shoolbraid / Belhangie Woods AWI is managed for commercial forestry usage, with felling cycles, and as such it is not considered to offer the semi-natural characteristics associated with the AWI designation and is therefore not considered as an Irreplaceable Habitat. Following the implementation of mitigation measures and compensatory planting (as set out in **Section 7.11**), this would allow the creation of a floristically diverse habitat in the long term (see also **Chapter 11: Forestry**) and the residual effects are considered to be **Negligible**, and **Not Significant** in the context of the EIA Regulations.

Habitats Blanket Bog f1a

7.12.2 In the absence of compensation, there will an irreversible **minor adverse** effect, considered **Not Significant** in the context of the EIA. With avoidance of sensitive areas, embedded mitigation and best practices, the extent of this effect will be reduced. Restoration of the remaining degraded habitat within the vicinity of the Study Area will compensate for this loss.

Dry heaths: upland (H4030) h1b5

7.12.3 In the absence of compensation, there will an irreversible **minor adverse** effect, considered **Not Significant** in the context of the EIA. Embedded mitigation will ensure that the extent of this effect will be reduced.

Other broadleaved woodland w1g

7.12.4 In the absence of compensation, there will an irreversible **minor adverse** effect considered **Not Significant** in the context of the EIA. Avoidance of the riparian woodlands and embedded mitigation and best practices, the extent of this effect will be reduced. The loss will be further offset with compensatory planting of riparian woodland along the rivers with reduced vegetation within the locality or woodland habitats which align with the objectives within the North East LBAP.

Other Scot's Pine woodland w2b

7.12.5 In the absence of compensation, there will an irreversible **minor adverse** effect, considered **Not Significant** in the context of the EIA. With avoidance, embedded mitigation and best practices, the extent of this effect will be reduced. The loss will be further offset with compensatory planting of native woodlands which align with the objectives within the North East LBAP.

Protected Species

- 7.12.6 The SPP will provide the mechanisms for avoidance of impacts following the mitigation hierarchy, identifying avoidance, mitigation, compensation and licensing requirements as required. Following the implementation of mitigation measures outlined with respect to each IEF, the residual effects to protected species (Scottish wildcat, roosting bats and badger) are therefore considered to be **Negligible**, and **Not Significant** in the context of the EIA Regulations.

Table 7.13: Summary of Significance of Effects, Additional Mitigation Measures and Residual Effects during Construction and Operational Phase

IEF	Potential Impacts (Construction and Operation)	Construction Likely Significant Effect (with embedded mitigation)	Operational Likely Significant Effect (with embedded mitigation)	Additional Mitigation and Compensation	Residual Effect
Shoolbraid / Belhangie Woods AWI	Construction: Habitat loss and degradation Operation: Maintenance of previously lost habitat	Moderate adverse and permanent	-	Compensatory Planting	Negligible
Blanket bog f1a / M19 <i>Calluna vulgaris</i> – <i>Eriophorum vaginatum</i> blanket mire; M20 <i>Eriophorum vaginatum</i> blanket and raised mire	Construction: Habitat loss, degradation, changes to hydrological condition Operation: Maintenance of previously lost habitat	Minor adverse and permanent	-	Restoration of remaining degraded habitat	Minor adverse
Dry heaths; upland (H4030) h1b5 / H10 <i>Calluna vulgaris</i> – <i>Erica cinerea</i> heath; H12 <i>Calluna vulgaris</i> – <i>Vaccinium myrtillus</i> heath	Construction: Habitat loss and degradation Operation: Maintenance of previously lost habitat	Minor adverse and permanent	-	-	Minor adverse and permanent

IEF	Potential Impacts (Construction and Operation)	Construction Likely Significant Effect (with embedded mitigation)	Operational Likely Significant Effect (with embedded mitigation)	Additional Mitigation and Compensation	Residual Effect
Dwarf shrub heath h1; Upland heathland h1b;	Construction: Habitat loss and degradation Operation: Maintenance of previously lost habitat	Negligible and temporary	-	-	Negligible
Other broadleaved woodland w1g	Construction: Habitat loss and degradation Operation: Maintenance of previously lost habitat	Minor adverse and permanent	-	Riparian Planting	Minor adverse
Other Scot's Pine woodland w2b	Construction: Habitat loss and degradation Operation: Maintenance of previously lost habitat	Minor adverse and permanent	-	Compensatory Planting of Native Conifer Woodlands	Minor adverse
Scottish Wildcat	Construction: Mortality and / or injury Accidental destruction of den sites Loss of denning and foraging habitat Temporary disturbance / displacement	Negligible adverse and short- term	Negligible adverse and temporary	SPP	Negligible

IEF	Potential Impacts (Construction and Operation)	Construction Likely Significant Effect (with embedded mitigation)	Operational Likely Significant Effect (with embedded mitigation)	Additional Mitigation and Compensation	Residual Effect
	Operation: Temporary disturbance				
Bats – disturbance to roosting bats	Construction: Disturbance: noise, vibration, human presence Operation: Temporary disturbance	Negligible adverse and short-term	Negligible adverse and temporary	SPP	Negligible
Badger	Construction: Mortality and / or injury Accidental destruction of setts Loss of foraging / commuting habitat Temporary disturbance / displacement Operation: Temporary disturbance	Barrier to movement: No effect Sett closure: Minor adverse	Negligible adverse and temporary	SPP	Negligible

7.13 Cumulative Assessment

Cumulative effects may arise where several individually insignificant impacts can occur simultaneously or collectively over a period of time affecting the same area or IEF. Projects assessed for potential cumulative effects on ecological receptors are provided below in **Table 7.13**. Glendye Wind Farm and associated infrastructure, Fetteresso Wind Farm and Craig Neil Wind Farm are consented, and there is potential for impacts to occur simultaneously during overlapping construction phases. Effects scoped into the respective EIA's were concluded as details in **Table.14** below.

Table 7.14 Projects considered within the Cumulative Impact Assessment

Development	Application Status	Potential for cumulative impacts
Glendye Wind Farm (104 MW) ⁶⁶	Consented	<ul style="list-style-type: none"> Habitats of conservation concerns (M19a blanket bog, habitat loss) and bats (habitat loss and mortality) were considered not significant following appropriate mitigation measures. Negligible, no significant effects on habitats of conservation concern (habitat fragmentation), bats (fragmentation and disturbance), otter (fragmentation and disturbance), water vole (habitat loss, fragmentation and disturbance), freshwater pearl mussel (mortality), and fish (mortality and habitat fragmentation). Further to the above, the EIA scoped in additional features and concluded effects to water vole (habitat fragmentation) to be significant at Site level (assumed to be Minor, not significant in EIA terms). An impact assessment on bats during operation concluded effects were considered to be Negligible, not significant (mortality and fragmentation).
Fetteresso Wind Farm (25 MW) ⁶⁷	Consented	<ul style="list-style-type: none"> Negligible to Low and not significant effects during construction on bats, wildcat, pine marten and wood ants (habitat loss, fragmentation, disturbance / displacement and mortality). Negligible to Low and not significant effects during construction on habitats including semi-natural broadleaved woodland; dry dwarf shrub heath, marshy grassland, blanket bog and flush and spring – acid flush (habitat loss, damage and degradation). Negligible to Low and not significant effects during operation on protected mammals (disturbance, displacement, injury or mortality). Negligible to Low and not significant effects during operation on bats (collision) and wood ants (damage). No impacts on habitats during operation.

⁶⁶ Coriolis Energy Ltd (2022) Glendye Wind Farm EIA, Volume 001 – Chapter 008 – Ecology. (online) Available at: <https://www.dpea.scotland.gov.uk/CaseDetails.aspx?id=121949&T=66> (last accessed 08/10/2025)

⁶⁷ Fred Olsen Renewables. Fetteresso Wind Farm. (online) Available at: <https://fredolsenrenewables.com/all-projects/fetteresso/> (last accessed 08/10/2025)

Development	Application Status	Potential for cumulative impacts
Craig Neil Wind Farm ⁶⁸	Consented	<ul style="list-style-type: none"> Not significant at a local scale during construction on habitat loss and disturbance. Not significant at a local scale during construction on bats (habitat loss and disturbance) or fisheries (habitat loss and barrier to movement). Not significant at a local scale during operation on bats (mortality). Significant at a local scale (Rumbelyond Burn) during operation on fisheries (barrier to movement) however, with additional mitigation, the residual impacts were assessed as not significant.
'Hydroglen' Green Hydrogen Production Facility (James Hutton Institute)	Consented	<p>Hydroglen lies south of the Proposed Development and is currently under construction.</p> <p>As this project is due for completion in winter 2025, there will not be a temporal overlap in construction periods.</p>
<p>Consented In combination with the Proposed Development</p> <p>Protected Species present within the wider study area may suffer additional displacement in the event of overlapping construction phases. Mitigation is required to ensure, where construction timelines overlap, phasing of development infrastructure construction timelines will be incorporated into the construction phasing plan and SPPs across SSEN developments within the vicinity, so that temporary displacement is reduced and availability of habitat resource is not adversely impacted.</p> <p>Habitat losses are likely to affect similar habitats to the Proposed Development given the geographical location, however habitat compensation and enhancement requirements will be detailed within Habitat Management Plans (HMPs) in compliance with NPF4, ensuring that adverse cumulative impacts do not occur.</p> <p>Habitat Degradation via water pollution will be avoided through pollution prevention measures to be detailed within the project CEMPs and through adequate Sustainable urban Drainage Systems (SuDS) measures.</p> <p>No significant adverse in combination effects are predicted.</p>		
Hurlie 400 kV Substation, Fetteresso Forest	Application	<p>Effects scoped into the EIA⁶⁹ were concluded as follows:</p> <ul style="list-style-type: none"> No significant effects during construction on designated sites (Mergie LNCS; habitat loss). No significant effects on habitats of conservation concern during construction (Upland heathland; and Upland Flushes, Fens and Swamps; direct loss and fragmentation). No significant effects during construction on bats (direct loss and fragmentation); otter (direct loss

68 ESB Asset Development UK Ltd. Craig Neil Wind Farm EIA Report. (online) Available at: [https://upa.aberdeenshire.gov.uk/online-applications/applicationDetails.do?activeTab=documents&keyVal=P81XYCCAQT00 \[APP/2018/0993\]](https://upa.aberdeenshire.gov.uk/online-applications/applicationDetails.do?activeTab=documents&keyVal=P81XYCCAQT00 [APP/2018/0993]) (last accessed 08/10/2025)

69 SSEN Transmission. Hurlie 400 kV Substation. (online) Available at: <https://www.ssen-transmission.co.uk/projects/project-map/hurlie-400kv-substation/> (last accessed 08/10/2025)

Development	Application Status	Potential for cumulative impacts
		<p>and fragmentation); wildcat (direct loss and fragmentation); badger (direct loss and fragmentation); red squirrel and pine marten (direct loss and fragmentation).</p> <ul style="list-style-type: none"> All operational effects scoped out. <p>In combination with the Proposed Development: No significant adverse in combination effects are predicted.</p>
Kintore to Tealing 400 kV OHL	Application	<p>The Kintore to Tealing OHL runs perpendicular to the east of the Proposed Development.</p> <p>Effects scoped into the EIA⁷⁰ were concluded as follows:</p> <ul style="list-style-type: none"> Minor and not significant effects during construction on designated or non-designated sites (habitat loss, fragmentation and disturbance). Minor and not significant effects during construction on Habitats of Conservation Concern (habitat loss and fragmentation). Minor and not significant effects during construction on bats (habitat loss and fragmentation), otter (habitat loss and fragmentation), Scottish wildcat (habitat loss, fragmentation and disturbance), badger (habitat loss, fragmentation and disturbance), red squirrel (habitat loss and fragmentation), pine marten (habitat loss and fragmentation), freshwater pearl mussel (habitat loss, fragmentation and disturbance), and Atlantic salmon (habitat loss, fragmentation and disturbance). Negligible and not significant effects during construction on beaver (habitat loss and fragmentation). All operational effects scoped out. <p>Although not consented there is potential for temporal overlap of construction periods. As such, there is potential for impacts to occur simultaneously during overlapping construction phases.</p> <p>In combination with the Proposed Development:</p> <p>Protected Species present within the wider study area may suffer additional displacement in the event of overlapping construction phases. Mitigation is required to ensure, where construction timelines overlap, phasing of development infrastructure would be incorporated into the construction plan so that temporary displacement is reduced.</p>

70 SSEN Transmission. Kintore to Tealing 400 KV OHL EIA Report. (online) Available at: <https://www.ssen-transmission.co.uk/projects/project-map/kintore-tealing-400kv-ohl-connection/> (last accessed 08/10/2025)

Development	Application Status	Potential for cumulative impacts
		<p>Habitat losses are likely to affect similar habitats to the Proposed Development given the geographical location, however habitat compensation and enhancement requirements to be detailed within HMPs in compliance with NPF4 would ensure that adverse cumulative impacts do not occur.</p> <p>Habitat Degradation via water pollution would be avoided through pollution prevention measures to be detailed within the project CEMPs and through adequate SuDs measures.</p> <p>No significant adverse in combination effects are predicted.</p>
<p>Hurlie Offshore Wind Farm / onshore connection (Potential Area for offshore connections)</p>	<p>Pre-Application</p>	<p>Hurlie Offshore Wind Farm / Onshore connection is located 1.41 km from the most easterly section of the proposed OHL. No information is available in relation to this project and its potential impacts on ecological features. However, it will largely experience habitat losses in lowland habitats which are unlikely to contribute to cumulative effects with habitat loss associated with the Proposed Development.</p> <p>As this project is at pre-planning stage it is unlikely there would be a temporal overlap in construction periods giving rise to displacement of protected species.</p> <p>No significant adverse in combination effects are predicted.</p>
<p>Quithel Battery Energy Storage System (BESS)</p>	<p>Pre-Application</p>	<p>Quithel BESS lies immediately east of the of the Proposed Development.</p> <p>As this development is pre-planning, potential habitat losses and degradation impacts cannot be foreseen. However, should this progress habitat losses will occur in lowland habitats of lower ecological value which are unlikely to contribute to cumulative effects with habitat loss associated with the Proposed Development. In addition, habitat compensation and enhancement requirements to be detailed within HMPs in compliance with NPF4 will ensure that adverse cumulative impacts do not occur.</p> <p>It is unlikely that there would be a temporal overlap in construction phases, as such displacement effects on protected species are ruled out.</p> <p>No significant adverse in combination effects are predicted.</p>

Development	Application Status	Potential for cumulative impacts
Bowdun Offshore Wind Farm Onshore Cable Connection and substation	Pre-Application	<p>Bowdun Offshore Wind Farm lies immediately east of the Proposed Development, the only part of the development considered for potential in-combination effect is the onshore cable connection and substation.</p> <p>As this is pre-planning, potential habitat losses and degradation impacts cannot be foreseen. However, it is likely that the local environment would experience habitat losses in lowland habitats, which are unlikely to contribute to cumulative effects with habitat loss associated with the Proposed Development. In addition, habitat compensation and enhancement requirements to be detailed within HMPs in compliance with NPF4 would ensure that adverse cumulative impacts do not occur.</p> <p>It is unlikely that there would be a temporal overlap in construction phases, as such displacement effects on protected species are ruled out.</p> <p>No significant adverse in combination effects are predicted.</p>
The Waters BESS (up to 50 MW)	Pre-Application	<p>The Waters BESS lies to the south of the Proposed Development. Based on its geographical location, it will largely experience habitat losses in lowland habitats which are unlikely to contribute to cumulative effects with habitat loss associated with the Proposed Development.</p> <p>As this project is pre-planning, it is unlikely there would be a temporal overlap in construction periods giving rise to displacement of protected species.</p> <p>No significant adverse in combination effects are predicted.</p>
Fetteresso Wind Farm Grid Connection / Access Corridor	Pre-Application	<p>There is no information available regarding the potential impacts of the Fetteresso Wind Farm Grid Connection and its potential impacts on ecological features.</p> <p>However, there is potential for impacts to occur simultaneously during overlapping construction phases.</p> <p><u>In combination with the Proposed Development:</u></p> <p>Protected Species present within the wider study area may suffer additional displacement in the event of overlapping construction phases. Mitigation is required to ensure, where construction timelines overlap, phasing of development infrastructure construction timelines will be incorporated into the construction phasing plan and SPPs across SSEN developments</p>

Development	Application Status	Potential for cumulative impacts
		<p>within the vicinity, so that temporary displacement is reduced and availability of habitat resource is not adversely impacted.</p> <p>Habitat losses are likely to be similar to the Proposed Development given the geographical location, however, habitat compensation and enhancement requirements will be detailed within HMPs in compliance with NPF4, ensuring that adverse cumulative impacts do not occur.</p> <p>Habitat Degradation via water pollution will be avoided through pollution prevention measures to be detailed within the project CEMPs and through adequate Sustainable urban Drainage Systems (SuDS) measures.</p> <p>No significant adverse in combination effects are predicted.</p>
<p>'Other SSEN Transmission Land'</p> <p>Including Fiddes 132 kV Grid Replacement</p>	<p>Pre-Application</p>	<p>SSEN Transmission land area is likely to be developed, however timelines are unknown.</p> <p>There is no information available regarding the potential impacts of the Fiddes 132 kV Grid Replacement as it relies on an unknown but new connection being proposed between the existing Fiddes substation and the existing / upgraded Fetteresso substation⁶⁷.</p> <p>However, there is potential for impacts to occur simultaneously during overlapping construction phases.</p> <p>In combination with the Proposed Development:</p> <p>Protected Species present within the wider study area may suffer additional displacement in the event of overlapping construction phases. Mitigation is required to ensure, where construction timelines overlap, phasing of development infrastructure construction timelines will be incorporated into the construction phasing plan and SPPs across SSEN developments within the vicinity, so that temporary displacement is reduced and availability of habitat resource is not adversely impacted.</p> <p>Habitat losses are likely to be similar to the Proposed Development given the geographical location, however habitat compensation and enhancement requirements will be detailed within HMPs in compliance with NPF4, ensuring that adverse cumulative impacts do not occur.</p> <p>Habitat Degradation via water pollution will be avoided through pollution prevention measures to be detailed within the project CEMPs and through adequate</p>

Development	Application Status	Potential for cumulative impacts
		<p>Sustainable urban Drainage Systems (SuDS) measures.</p> <p>No significant adverse in combination effects are predicted.</p>

7.13.1 In addition to the above, the UGC sections of the Proposed Development (proposed under the Applicant's permitted development rights and assessed separately (see **Appendix 1.1**)) is discussed here on the basis that it represents an 'intra' project cumulative effect. There is potential for impacts to occur simultaneously during overlapping construction phases. Possible in-combination effects include:

- **Protected Species** present within the wider study area may suffer additional displacement in the event of overlapping construction phases. Mitigation is required to ensure, where construction timelines overlap between the Proposed Development, and the UGC, phasing of development infrastructure construction timelines would be incorporated into the construction phasing plan, so that temporary displacement is reduced and availability of habitat resource is not adversely impacted.
- **Habitat losses** will be similar to the Proposed Development given the geographical location, however it is assumed that management methods would be employed to ensure habitats are reinstated post development. As such, habitat losses would be limited, short-mid term temporary in nature, and unlikely to result in in-combination effects.
- **Habitat Degradation** via water pollution would be avoided through pollution prevention measures to be detailed within CEMPs and through adequate Sustainable urban Drainage Systems (SuDS) measures.

7.13.2 As such, no significant in combination cumulative effects are predicted.

7.14 Summary and Conclusions

7.14.1 This EclA has been undertaken using scientific data collected through a combination of desk study, targeted surveys, and consultation with relevant nature conservation organisations. Best practice guidelines, such as the CIEEM Guidelines, serve as the foundation for the impact assessment.

7.14.2 This process established ecological features that could potentially be affected by the Proposed Development. No potential effects on statutory designated sites were identified.

7.14.3 The Proposed Development has been designed to minimise impacts on important habitats, peatland and protected species as far as practicable. This has been achieved through embedded mitigation and the iterative design process. This process, combined with further commitments to certain mitigation measures pre-construction, and during construction allowed potential effects on the majority of habitats and species present to be scoped-out of the assessment. The following IEFs were taken forward to the assessment stage: Shoolbraid / Belhangie Woods AWI site, blanket bog, upland heathland, other broadleaved woodland, other Scots pine woodland, wildcat, roosting bats and badger.

7.14.4 The EIA assessment concluded that following the successful implementation of mitigation measures, guided by the Species Protection Plans (SPPs), Outline Biodiversity Enhancement Plan (oBEP), and General Environmental Management Plans (GEMPs), potential residual impacts upon AWI sites and protected species are considered **Negligible** and therefore **Not Significant**, and residual impacts upon habitats are considered **Minor Adverse** and **Not Significant**. The oBEP will be developed further to compensate for the effects on habitats lost, and further enhance habitats to achieve an overall Biodiversity Net Gain (BNG) and beneficial impact overall.

7.14.5 A detailed assessment of the impacts on the qualifying features of the River Dee SAC has been undertaken in a Shadow Habitats Regulations Appraisal (HRA) for the Proposed Development to meet the requirements of the Conservation of Habitats and Species Regulations (the 2017 Habitat and Species Regulations). The Shadow HRA concludes there would be no adverse impact on the integrity of any European site as a result of the Proposed Development following the implementation of mitigation measures.