Scottish & Southern Electricity Networks

TRANSMISSION

Spittal to Loch Buidhe to Beauly 400 kV

OHL Connection

Environmental Impact Assessment

Volume 5 | Technical Appendix

Appendix 8.7 | Report to Inform Habitat Regulations Appraisal (Caithness Lochs SPA)

July 2025

Scottish & Southern Electricity Networks

TRANSMISSION

Spittal – Loch Buidhe – Beauly 400 kV OHL Connection

Habitats Regulations Appraisal (HRA) Report to inform Appropriate Assessment Caithness Lochs Special Protection Area and Ramsar Site

July 2025

Scottish & Southern Electricity Networks

TRANSMISSION

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1 INTRODUCTION

1.1.1 This report has been produced to inform the Habitats Regulations Appraisal (HRA) process for Scottish and Southern Electricity Networks Transmission ("SSEN Transmission") application for consent to construct and operate the Spittal to Loch Buidhe to Beauly 400 kV Overhead Line (OHL) Connection (Proposed Development). The project description and overview of the HRA process are presented in the HRA Screening Assessment Report (Screening Assessment) (**Volume 5, Appendix 8.7**). The Screening Assessment presents the HRA Stage 1 Screening Stage assessment of the Proposed Development with respect to its potential to have a Likely Significant Effect (LSE) on European and Ramsar sites of nature conservation importance, either alone or in-combination with other plans or projects.

1.1.2 Separate reports have been produced for each European or Ramsar site identified in the HRA Screening Report as requiring further assessment.

1.1.3 This report provides information to allow the Competent Authority (i.e. the Scottish Ministers for the Proposed Development) to undertake an HRA Stage 2 Appropriate Assessment (AA) for the Caithness Lochs Special Protection Area (SPA) and Ramsar site. The SPA is 1,381.65 ha and qualifies[1] under Article 4.1 by regularly supporting, in winter, populations of European importance of the Annex 1 species whooper swan (*Cygnus cygnus*) and Greenland white-fronted goose (*Anser albifrons flavirostris*). The SPA also qualifies under Article 4.2 by regularly supporting, in winter, a population of European importance of the greylag goose.

1.1.4 The Caithness Lochs Ramsar site[2] is 1,381.19 ha and qualifies under Ramsar Criterion 6 by regularly supporting 1 % or more of the individuals in a population of waterbirds including whooper swan, Greenland white-fronted goose and greylag goose.

[1] NatureScot Site Link – Caithness Lochs SPA Citation https://www.nature.scot/sites/default/files/special-protection-area/8477/spa-citation.pdf
[2] NatureScot Site Link – Caithness Lochs Ramsar Citation https://www.nature.scot/sites/default/files/ramsar-site/8413/ramsar-site-citation.pdf

2 METHODOLOGY

2.1 Introduction

2.1.1 The approach to the HRA has followed that set out in the Conservation of Habitats and Species Regulations 2017, as amended ('The Habitats Regulations') and NatureScot guidance on the consideration of plans or projects affecting SACs and SPAs [3, 4, 5]. It has also taken account of a range of other guidance material including the DTA Publications HRA Handbook [6] and that produced by the European Commission (EC) 2018a [7], 2018b [8], 2007 [9], 2002 [10].

2.2 Overview of the HRA Process

2.2.1 The HRA process comprises four main stages:

- **Stage 1 Screening** to identify the likely effects of a project on a European site and consider whether the effects are likely to be significant.
- **Stage 2 Appropriate Assessment** to determine whether the integrity of the European site will be adversely affected by the Project.
- **Stage 3 Assessment of Alternative Solutions** to establish if there are any that will result in a lesser effect on the European site.
- **Stage 4 Imperative Reasons of Overriding Public Interest (IROPI)** and **Compensatory Measures** to establish whether it is necessary for the project to proceed despite the effects on the European site, and to confirm that necessary compensatory measures are in place to maintain the coherence of the National Site Network.

2.2.2 The term "Habitats Regulations Appraisal" encompasses both the initial screening stage and, where required, the follow-on Stages 2 – 4. Stage 1 Screening was described in the HRA Screening Report and will not be considered in this report. Stage 2 is discussed in more detail in the following section.

2.3 Stage 2 – Appropriate Assessment

2.3.1 An AA is undertaken by the Competent Authority to determine potential effects of a project upon the integrity of European sites. As the person applying for consent, the Applicant should provide and analyse sufficient information to allow the Scottish Ministers to determine whether the aspects of the project pertinent to their consents will or will not adversely affect the integrity of European sites.

2.3.2 AA should exclusively focus on the qualifying features of the European site, and it must consider any impacts on the conservation objectives of those qualifying interests. It should also be based on and supported by evidence that can stand up to scientific scrutiny. EC guidance states that without proper reasoning the assessment does not fulfil its purpose and cannot be considered 'appropriate' and therefore the development

[3] NatureScot (Updated 2025) Habitats Regulations Appraisal (HRA) Guidance. Accessed July 2025 at https://www.nature.scot/professional-advice/planning-and-development/environmental-assessment/habitats-regulations-appraisal-hra
[4] NatureScot (2022). European Site Casework Guidance – How to consider plans and projects affecting Special Areas of Conservation (SACs) and Special Protection Areas (SPAs).
[5] NatureScot (2019). Guidance Note - The handling of mitigation in Habitats Regulations Appraisal - the People Over Wind CJEU judgement.
[6] Tyldesley, D. and Chapman, C. (2013) The Habitats Regulations Assessment Handbook, December 2024 edition UK, DTA Publications Limited.
[7] European Commission (2018). Managing Natura 2000 sites. The provisions of Article 6 of the 'Habitats' Directive 92/43/EEC.
[8] European Commission (2018). Guidance on energy transmission Infrastructure and EU nature legislation.
[9] European Commission (2007). Guidance Document on Article 6(4) of the Habitats Directive 92/43/EEC.
[10] European Commission (2002). Assessment of plans and projects significantly affecting Natura 2000 sites.

cannot be consented. In terms of what is reasonable, guidance states "*to identify the potential risks, so far as they may be reasonably foreseeable in the light of such information as can be reasonably obtained*" [11].

2.3.3 In undertaking an AA, there are two phases:

- a scientific evaluation of all the likely significant effects of the project on the relevant qualifying interests of a European site; and
- a conclusion based on outcomes of the scientific evaluation whether the integrity of a European site will be compromised.

2.3.4 The initial onus when carrying out an AA is to prove that no adverse impacts due to a project will occur, either alone or in-combination with other projects, which would compromise a European sites integrity (Section 63(5) & (6) of the Habitats Regulations). Site integrity can be defined as: "*The coherence of its ecological structure and function, across its whole area that enables it to sustain the habitat, complex of habitats and/or the levels of populations of the species for which it was classified*" [12].

2.3.5 The assessment will also consider any avoidance or mitigation measures which will be implemented to avoid or reduce the level of impact from the project. The Competent Authority may also consider the use of conditions or restrictions to help avoid adverse effects on site integrity.

2.3.6 If the AA concludes that the integrity of the European site would be adversely affected, consent can only be granted if there are no alternative solutions, IROPI is applicable and compensatory measures have been secured (Section 64 of the Habitats Regulations).

[11] NatureScot (2001). Natura casework guidance: Consideration of proposals affecting SPAs and SACs.

[12] NatureScot (2014). Natura casework guidance: How to consider plans and projects affecting Special Areas of Conservation (SACs) and Special Protection Areas (SPAs).

3 INFORMATION TO INFORM THE APPROPRIATE ASSESSMENT

3.1 Introduction

3.1.1 The Screening Assessment determined that an AA was required for Caithness Lochs SPA and Ramsar site because the potential for LSEs cannot be ruled out for the following qualifying interest features:

- Greenland white-fronted goose (wintering);
- greylag goose (wintering); and,
- whooper swan (wintering).

3.1.2 The LSEs on greylag goose and whooper swan within the SPA / Ramsar site are considered to result from the potential for:

- direct loss from mortality due to collision with infrastructure;
- barrier effects as a result of the presence of infrastructure; and
- indirect loss of habitat loss due to disturbance and displacement.

3.1.3 LSEs on SPA / Ramsar site Greenland white-fronted goose are limited to indirect loss of habitat.

3.1.4 This section assesses the impacts of the Proposed Development on the qualifying interest features listed above in relation to the conservation objectives for the site. The aim is to identify whether no adverse effect can be concluded (as described in **Section 2**), or whether there will be adverse effects on the integrity of Caithness Lochs SPA / Ramsar site.

3.1.5 The assessment has drawn on the ornithology survey findings which are presented within **Volume 2 Chapter 9 Ornithology** of the Environmental Impact Assessment Report ("EIA Report") and associated Technical Appendices in **Volume 5**.

3.2 Conservation Objectives and Latest Assessed Condition

3.2.1 The Conservation Objectives (COs)[13] for the relevant qualifying interest features of the Caithness Lochs SPA are set out in Table 3-1. COs are not provided for Ramsar Sites.

Table 3-1 Conservation Objectives for Caithness Lochs SPA

Qualifying Interest Feature	Conservation Objectives

Greenland white-fronted goose (wintering)
Greylag goose (wintering)
Whooper swan (wintering)
	• To avoid deterioration of the habitats of the qualifying species or significant disturbance to the qualifying species, thus ensuring that the integrity of the site is maintained; and,
	• To ensure for the qualifying species that the following are maintained in the long term:
	  • population of the species as a viable component of the site;
	  • distribution of the species within the site;
	  • distribution and extent of habitats supporting the species;
	  • structure, function and supporting processes of habitats supporting the species; and
	  • no significant disturbance of the species.

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[13] NatureScot Site Link – Caithness Lochs SPA COs https://www.nature.scot/sites/default/files/special-protection-area/8477/conservation-objectives.pdf

3.2.2 The latest assessed site condition of the relevant qualifying interest features of the SPA are listed in Table 3-2, as detailed on the NatureScot SiteLink[14] site.

Table 3-2 Summary of Site Condition

Qualifying Interest Feature	Latest Assessed Condition*	Date of Assessment	Negative Pressures
Greylag goose (wintering)	Favourable Maintained	15th November 2015	There are no listed negative pressures for this feature.
Whooper swan (wintering)	Favourable Maintained	8th March 2015	There are no listed negative pressures for this feature.
Greenland white-fronted goose (wintering)	Favourable Declining	1st April 2016	Agricultural operations

3.3 Potential Impacts and Relevant Mitigation Measures

3.3.1 Figure 1 illustrates the location of the Proposed Development in relation to the Caithness Lochs SPA / Ramsar site. The proposed OHL is approximately 2.9 km from the nearest point of the SPA / Ramsar site boundary, Loch Watten, with the closest construction works at Tower no.10. No temporary or permanent infrastructure associated with the Proposed Development is situated within the SPA / Ramsar site.

3.3.2 The Screening Assessment, taking a precautionary approach, concluded that in the absence of mitigation it is possible that construction activities could result in LSEs on the SPA / Ramsar site features due to indirect loss of bird habitats as a result of disturbance and displacement of the qualifying bird species from suitable supporting habitat. Furthermore, the Screening Assessment concluded that in the absence of mitigation it is possible that during the operation phase the OHL infrastructure could result in direct impacts on the SPA / Ramsar site features as a result of collision with infrastructure and the OHL posing barrier effects.

3.3.3 Embedded project mitigation measures are set out in the Environmental Impact Assessment Report (EIAR) and the General Environmental Management Plans (GEMPs) (**Volume 5, Appendix 3.3: GEMPS**), Species Protection Plans (SPPs) (**Volume 5, Appendix 3.4: SPPs**) and will be further reinforced in the final Construction Environmental Management Plan (CEMP) (an outline CEMP has been included in **Volume 5, Appendix 3.6**).

3.3.4 The Bird SPP has been developed in consultation with NatureScot and kept under review to ensure that it is in line with current guidance, and, if appropriate, updated accordingly. Measures within the Bird SPP relevant to the SPA include, but are not limited to:

- The Ecological Clerk of Works (ECoW) will review whether construction activities are likely to affect breeding birds and, if so, what mitigation options are available. A hierarchical approach to mitigation will be applied to any occupied bird habitat that may be affected under the Project works.
- The ECoW will attend site on a regular basis throughout the construction period to ensure all environmental mitigation relevant to breeding birds is delivered.
- A hierarchical approach to mitigation of Programme / Avoid / Risk Assess will be applied to any birds that may be affected under the Project works. Works to be programmed outwith breeding season, where practicable.
- Appropriate protection zones will be put in place (see Appendix A of the Bird SPP) and will be set by the ECoW.

[14] NatureScot 2025. Caithness Lochs SPA. Accessed Jan 2025 at: https://sitelink.nature.scot/site/8477

- A Protected Species Risk Assessment will be completed by the ECoW when works need to be done in protection zones, to assess if disturbance can be avoided.
- An emergency procedure will be implemented if breeding birds are encountered, with all works within 50 m (non-scheduled species) or max protection distance (scheduled species) immediately ceasing.
- Specific mitigation such as dissuasion techniques (habitat management, active dissuasion/disturbance) and removal of disused nests.

3.3.5 The mitigation measures set out in the EIAR follow industry best practice and are routinely deployed on SSEN Transmission projects. They will be stipulated in construction contracts and the implementation and audit of these measures will be overseen by a suitably qualified and experienced Environmental / Ecological Clerk of Works (ECoW).

3.3.6 The embedded mitigation measures for the Proposed Development are considered sufficient, and no further species-specific mitigation is proposed for the whooper swan, greylag goose and Greenland white-fronted geese.

3.4 Assessment of Effects

3.4.1 The Proposed Development is located approximately 2.9 km southwest of Caithness Lochs SPA and Ramsar site at its closest point. NatureScot SPA connectivity guidance[15] advises that during the winter season, whooper swan has a core foraging range of less than 5 km, greylag goose has a core foraging range of 15 – 20 km and Greenland white-fronted goose has a core foraging range of 5-8 km.

Disturbance and displacement: greylag goose, Greenland white-fronted goose and whooper swan

3.4.2 Greylag goose, Greenland white-fronted goose and whooper swan utilise the Caithness Lochs SPA / Ramsar site over winter. The Proposed Development is located approximately 2.9 km from the nearest point of the site boundary, Loch Watten, and does not physically overlap with the SPA / Ramsar site. NatureScot guidance advises that greylag geese and whooper swans are sensitive to disturbance up to 600 m away[16] from sources of disturbance. As the Proposed Development is beyond the maximum 600 m disturbance distance for wintering populations of both species, disturbance and displacement of birds within the SPA / Ramsar site is not predicted.

3.4.3 During construction there is the potential to cause disturbance and / or displacement of greylag geese, white-fronted goose and whooper swans from the SPA / Ramsar site population from foraging habitat outside of the site boundary as the Proposed Development is within the respective core foraging ranges of all three species (as detailed in Section 3.4.1).

3.4.4 Winter foraging geese surveys were undertaken in fields to the south-west of Loch Watten. A peak count of 400 individuals was recorded November 2023, with the closest field holding foraging birds approximately 500 m west of the Proposed Development. During winter foraging surveys around Loch Watten, a peak of three whooper swans was recorded, with all records in fields over 2 km from the proposed alignment. The Proposed Development does pass through areas of suitable foraging habitat for geese and swans in the form grazing pastures, and it is possible that there will be some localised displacement of birds from foraging areas. However, there is abundant alternative suitable foraging habitat beyond 600 m of the Proposed Development,

[15] SNH (2016) Assessing Connectivity with Special Protection Areas (SPAs) Guidance. Version 3 - June 2016.
[16] NatureScot Disturbance Distances in selected Scottish Bird Species – NatureScot Guidance. Available online at: https://www.nature.scot/doc/disturbance-distances-selected-scottish-bird-species-naturescot-guidance. Accessed 10/02/2025.

including preferred arable fields, which greylag goose, whooper swan and Greenland white-fronted goose will utilise if displaced by the construction of the Proposed Development.

3.4.5 As a result, impacts from disturbance and displacement will be negligible, and will not result in an adverse effect on the SPA/Ramsar site populations of greylag goose, Greenland white-fronted goose or whooper swan in relation to the conservation objectives for the site.

Barrier effects as a result of the presence of infrastructure: greylag goose and whooper swan

3.4.6 Barrier effects occur where the vertical configuration of wires and towers creates an actual or perceived barrier which birds may not cross. There are existing 132 kV and 275 kV OHLs which run in parallel to, or are in proximity to, much of the length of the Proposed Development (particularly Sections A and B) where baseline surveys have shown crossings by greylag geese and whooper swans. This, together with survey data from other areas of Scotland, demonstrates that birds do habituate to the presence of OHLs.

3.4.7 As a result, no barrier effects are predicted and will not result in any adverse effects on SPA / Ramsar site populations in relation to the conservation objectives for the site.

Collision Risk: greylag goose and whooper swan

3.4.8 During baseline surveys of Section A of the Proposed Development greylag goose flights were recorded crossing the alignment in Section A 49 times, 19 of which were at Collision Risk Height (CRH) i.e. >5 to 70 m. Of these, 25 flights at all height bands and 14 at CRH were within connectivity distance (20 km) of the SPA / Ramsar site. Whooper swan was recorded on two occasions with a single flight crossing the Proposed Development at CRH although this was beyond the core foraging range for whopper swan from the SPA / Ramsar site. Baseline surveys did not record any flight passes of Greenland white-fronted geese.

3.4.9 During baseline surveys, greylag geese and whooper swan were recorded crossing existing OHLs, which are located parallel to the proposed alignment, including regularly crossing the existing 132kV OHL that runs parallel to the A9 for much of the length of the Proposed Development within 20 km of the SPA/Ramsar site. This behaviour is suggestive of birds having developed a degree of familiarity with existing OHLs, whereby they do not represent a barrier to movement or high risk of collision. Avoidance rates have not been calculated for OHLs for bird species in Scotland; however, avoidance rates calculated for onshore wind farms suggest greylag geese and swans have a good ability to avoid obstacles in flight (99.8 % avoidance for geese and 99.5 % avoidance for swans).

3.4.10 Given the relatively low level of recorded flight activity and good ability to avoid obstacles of both species, the risk of collision is considered to be negligible, and will not result in an adverse effect on the SPA / Ramsar site populations in relation to the conservation objectives for the site.

In-combination Effects

3.4.11 Twelve other developments were identified which could result in in-combination effects on the Caithness Lochs SPA / Ramsar site with the Proposed Development.

<u>Banniskirk 400 kV Substation and HVDC Converter Station</u>

3.4.12 Erection and operation of an air Insulated Switchgear 400 kV substation and HVDC converter station with associated buildings, installation of new platforms, drainage infrastructure, temporary construction compound, landscaping, mounding and other ancillary works are located adjacent to the Proposed Development. The EIA and HRA predicted potentially significant effects on Caithness Lochs SPA / Ramsar site on foraging or resting Greenland white-fronted goose, graylag goose and whooper swan. However, the proposed substation and converter station will be constructed on land which has been classified as predominantly modified grassland,

which is not considered to be optimal foraging habitat for wintering geese and swans. Additionally, baseline surveys did not record any SPA / Ramsar site species using the fields which will be affected by the proposed Substation and HVDC Converter Station for foraging and / or resting. It was concluded that the project would not adversely impact the features of the SPA / Ramsar site. The Proposed Development will result in a negligible area of habitat loss for SPA / Ramsar site species. With embedded mitigation measures in place, collision mortality and disturbance of SPA / Ramsar site species from the Proposed Development will be negligible. Consequently, the in-combination effects will not adversely affect the SPA / Ramsar site whooper swan, greylag goose or Greenland white-fronted goose populations.

Strathy South Wind Farm Grid Connection

3.4.13 An onshore 11 km grid connection for the proposed Strathy South Wind Farm including removal of existing wood pole infrastructure will be located 25 km west from the Proposed Development. The EIAR identified important ornithological features including the greylag goose population from Caithness and Sutherland Peatlands SPA / Ramsar site however the assessment predicted no significant effects on the species. With embedded mitigation measures in place, collision mortality and disturbance of SPA/Ramsar site species from the Proposed Development will be negligible. Consequently, the in-combination effects will not adversely affect the SPA / Ramsar site greylag goose populations.

Kirkton Energy Park

3.4.14 Construction and operation of 11 wind turbines located 25 km west from the Proposed Development. The EIAR predicted potentially significant effects on the greylag goose population of Caithness Lochs SPA / Ramsar site. However, with appropriate mitigation measures in place, including a habitat management plan, the EIAR predicted that the project would not adversely impact the features of the SPA or other ornithological receptors. Kirkton Energy Park is beyond the connectivity distance from the SPA for whooper swan and no impacts on supporting habitat or collision were predicted in the EIAR. No Greenland white-fronted geese were recorded during surveys, and a negligible level of collision risk was predicted for greylag goose. With embedded mitigation measures in place, collision mortality and disturbance of SPA / Ramsar site species from the Proposed Development will be negligible. Consequently, the in-combination effects will not adversely affect the SPA / Ramsar site greylag or Greenland white-fronted goose populations.

Ayre Offshore Wind Farm Grid Connection

3.4.15 An onshore grid connection for the proposed offshore Ayre Wind Farm including substation, inter-array cables, export cables and associated infrastructure which will be located adjacent to the Proposed Development. The Onshore Scoping Report (issued 22.04.2024) defined important ornithological areas in the vicinity including greylag goose, Greenland white-fronted goose, whooper swan features of Caithness Lochs SPA / Ramsar site. However, there is insufficient information available at this time on the impacts of the Ayre Offshore Wind Farm Grid Connection to undertake a cumulative assessment. It is assumed that when it is prepared, the EIAR for Ayre Offshore Wind Farm Grid Connection will assess in-combination effects with the Proposed Development.

Ouglassy Wind Farm

3.4.16 Ouglassy onshore wind farm comprises eight wind turbines located adjacent to the Proposed Development. The Onshore Scoping Report (issued 05.04.2024) defined important ornithological areas in the vicinity including greylag goose, Greenland white-fronted goose, whooper swan features of Caithness Lochs SPA / Ramsar site. However, there is insufficient information available at this time on the impacts of Ouglassy Wind Farm to

undertake a cumulative assessment. It is assumed that when it is prepared, the EIAR for Ouglassy Wind Farm will assess in-combination effects with the Proposed Development.

Golticlay Wind Farm Redesign

3.4.17 A proposed up to 13 wind turbines located 2 km east to the Proposed Development. The EIA and HRA predicted potentially significant effects on greylag goose as a qualifying feature of Caithness Lochs SPA / Ramsar site. The EIAR predicted that the proposed varied wind farm design would not have significant effects on any of the bird species scoped in to the assessment. Additionally, no LSE was predicted for any of the nearby SPAs, either alone or in-combination with other wind farm developments. With embedded mitigation measures in place, collision mortality and disturbance of SPA / Ramsar site species from the Proposed Development will be negligible. Consequently, the in-combination effects will not adversely affect the SPA / Ramsar site greylag goose populations.

Cairnmore Hill Wind Farm (Re-design)

3.4.18 A proposed wind farm re-design, approximately 14 km from the Proposed Development. The re-design proposes a reduced number of turbines (5). The design which has reduced predicted collision impacts on all the Caithness Lochs SPA qualifying species. The key potential impact from the wind farm was the potential loss of geese and whooper swan foraging habitat and collision risk. The most recent response document from Highland Council (dated on 27.02.2025) refused the planning permission due to significantly detrimental effects on landscape qualities, which are not clearly outweighed by social, environmental, or economic benefits. In relation to ornithological receptors, NatureScot advised that the proposed wind farm would not result in adverse impacts on features of the Caithness Lochs SPA / Ramsar site. With embedded mitigation measures in place, collision mortality and disturbance of SPA / Ramsar site species from the Proposed Development will be negligible. Consequently, the in-combination effects will not adversely affect the SPA / Ramsar site whooper swan, greylag goose or Greenland white-fronted goose populations.

Hollandmey Renewable Energy Development

3.4.19 A proposed 10 turbine wind farm 15 km northeast from the Proposed Development. The EIAR and HRA predicted potentially significant effects on Caithness Lochs SPA / Ramsar site for greylag goose. It was concluded that with appropriate mitigation measures in place, including a habitat management plan, the project would not adversely impact the features of the SPA / Ramsar site. Given the distance of the wind farm from the SPA / Ramsar site, no disturbance to SPA / Ramsar site birds was predicted, and collision risk modelling predicted collision of fewer than one bird per year. With embedded mitigation measures in place, collision mortality and disturbance of SPA / Ramsar site species from the Proposed Development will be negligible. Consequently, the in-combination effects will not adversely affect the SPA / Ramsar site greylag goose population.

Lochend Wind Farm Extension

3.4.20 A proposed five turbine wind farm extension 15 km north-east of the Proposed Development. Impacts on greylag goose, Greenland white-fronted goose, whooper swan as features of Caithness Lochs SPA / Ramsar site were taken forward for assessment in the shadow HRA for the wind farm but predicted the development would not result in any disturbance to the SPA / Ramsar site, and negligible collision mortality. With embedded mitigation measures in place, collision mortality and disturbance of SPA / Ramsar site species from the

Proposed Development will be negligible. Consequently, the in-combination effects will not adversely affect the SPA / Ramsar site whooper swan, greylag goose or Greenland white-fronted goose populations.

Slickly Wind Farm

3.4.21 A proposed 11 turbine wind farm located 16 km north-west of the Proposed Development. The EIAR and HRA predicted potentially significant effects on Caithness Lochs SPA / Ramsar site for whooper swan and greylag geese. The application was granted planning permission on appeal, with the reporter finding that there would be no effect on the integrity of the SPA / Ramsar site for the wind farm either alone or in-combination with other developments. With embedded mitigation measures in place, collision mortality and disturbance of SPA / Ramsar site species from the Proposed Development will be negligible. Consequently, the in-combination effects will not adversely affect the SPA / Ramsar site whooper swan and greylag goose populations.

Ackron Wind Farm

3.4.22 A proposed 11 turbine wind farm 25 km west of the Proposed Development. The Scoping Report (dated 23.11.23) scoped-in the qualifying features of Caithness Lochs SPA / Ramsar site. There is the potential for in-combination effects on the SPA / Ramsar site with the Proposed Development. However, there is insufficient information available on the impacts of Ackron Wind Farm at this time to undertake an in-combination assessment. It is assumed that when it is prepared, the EIAR for Ackron Wind Farm will assess in-combination effects with the Proposed Development.

Melvich Wind Energy Hub

3.4.23 A proposed 12 turbine wind farm 27 km north-west of the Proposed Development. Important Ornithological Features taken forward for further consideration within the EIA (dated March 2023) included greylag goose as a qualifying feature of Caithness Lochs SPA / Ramsar site. NatureScot advised that the project would result in a low collision risk for greylag geese and that the wind farm area is not known to be an important foraging site for feeding geese and that as a result the wind farm would not adversely affect the integrity of the SPA / Ramsar site. In-combination effects could occur on Caithness Lochs SPA / Ramsar site with the Proposed Development. However, with the embedded mitigation measures in place, collision mortality and disturbance of SPA species will be negligible. Consequently, the in-combination effects will not adversely affect the SPA/Ramsar site whooper swan and greylag goose populations.

3.5 Summary of Effect on Site Integrity

3.5.1 No adverse effects on the three qualifying bird species (greylag goose, Greenland white-fronted goose and whooper swan) in relation to the conservation objectives for the site are predicted and therefore no adverse effect on the integrity of the Caithness Lochs SPA and Ramsar site is anticipated either alone or in-combination with other projects.

Caithness Lochs SPA & Ramsar

Lochan Ealach

Loch Calder

Halkirk

Banniskirk Substation

N5

N10

N15

N20

N25

N30

N35

N40

N45

Loch Heilen

Loch Scarmclate

Loch Watten

Loch of Wester

THURSO

Thurso

A882

Wick

Tower Location
Alignment Section A
Temporary Tower Compound Area
Equipotential Zones (EPZs) (Pulling Locations)
Temporary Access Track - Cut/Fill
Temporary Access Track - Floating
Permanent Access Track - Cut/Fill
Permanent Access Track - Floating
Special Protection Area (SPA)
Ramsar

0 1 2 3 4 5
Kilometres

N

SCALE: See Scale Bar	VERSION: A03
SIZE: A3	DRAWN: CI
PROJECT: 0652629	CHECKED: PW
DATE: 8/11/2025	APPROVED: KG

Figure 1
Spittal - Loch Buidhe - Beauly 400 kV OHL Connection
Caithness Lochs SPA and Ramsar

ERM

Scottish & Southern Electricity Networks TRANSMISSION

PROJECTION: British National Grid

Path: \\uksprdgisfs01\Data\London\Projects\0652629 - SSE Beauly to Loch Buidhe\Maps\0720281 - SLBB - Designated Sites.aprx / 0720281 - SLBB - HRA - 8 - Caithness Lochs SPA and Ramsar - A03