

The Great Grid Upgrade

Sea Link

Sea Link

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Pegwell Bay Seal Survey Report

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1. Pegwell Bay Seal Survey Report

1.1 Introduction

- 1.1.1 The Sea Link Project (hereafter referred to as the 'Proposed Project') is a proposal by National Grid Electricity Transmission plc (hereafter referred to as National Grid) to reinforce the transmission network in the South East of England and East Anglia. This would be achieved by reinforcing the network with a High Voltage Direct Current (HVDC) Link between Aldeburgh in Suffolk and Pegwell Bay in Kent.
- 1.1.2 Both harbour and grey seals are observed in Pegwell Bay and harbour seals particularly are known to haul-out and be present in relatively high numbers in the River Stour (which flows into Pegwell Bay). Seals 'haul-out' on shore for pupping, nursing, moulting and resting (SCOS, 2022). The highest number of hauled-out seals occurs during the pupping and subsequent moulting season. For harbour seal, pupping occurs in June and July, with moulting occurring in August (SCOS, 2022). Pupping for grey seals typically occurs in August to December with moulting between December to April.
- 1.1.3 As part of the assessment of potential impacts on marine mammals resulting from the Proposed Project, consultation has been undertaken with consultees including Kent Wildlife Trust (KWT). KWT have raised concerns about the effects of the Proposed Project on harbour seals (*Phoca vitulina*) and grey seals (*Halichoerus grypus*) likely to be present in Pegwell Bay, Kent.
- 1.1.4 Abundance data were fairly readily available but information regarding where the seals were most likely to be found was not. To reflect the concerns of KWT and to collect additional information for the assessment of potential impacts to seals some observation surveys were undertaken in Pegwell Bay and the River Stour.
- 1.1.5 The specific purpose of the seal surveys was to establish the exact locations where seals haul-out at low tide in order to identify the proximity of hauled-out seals to Proposed Project activities in Pegwell Bay. Whilst seal counts were made at both low and high tide, this was not the main purpose of the survey, particularly as the most effective means of counting hauled-out seals is through aerial surveys, as undertaken by Zoological Society of London (ZSL)¹ (Zoological Society of London, 2021).

1.2 Methodology

- 1.2.1 Seal observation surveys were conducted mostly in the River, largely just upstream from the mouth of the River Stour, where seals were known to haul-out². This region of the river has several sand and mudflats visible at low tide, with several areas easily accessible to seals for hauling out. The river channel rapidly narrows a small distance upstream and the river banks are steep sided and not suited to hauling-out.

¹ A more recent 2024 survey has also been conducted but the results for this survey are not yet publicly available.

² An initial assessment of Pegwell Bay was conducted and no suitable haul-out habitats were identified. In addition, discussion with the local seal watching boat, River Runner, indicated that seals are hauled out on the banks of the River Stour rather than the wider bay area. Therefore, the survey focused on the River Stour.

- 1.2.2 The observations were undertaken from a vessel slowly moving down river, passing a number of locations on both sides of the river, where seals were congregated. Binoculars were used to record the location and number of seals hauled-out on the several different sandbank areas within the river. A note was also taken of seals in the water but due to the movement of seals under the water surface it was difficult to accurately record the number of seals present in the water. Therefore, the number of seals in water have not been included in the results presented in this report. Species were also identified where possible, with the presence of pups also recorded, and any behaviour of note also recorded.
- 1.2.3 To establish a good understanding of the use of the river during haul-out, the surveys were conducted once a month over a three-month period from September to November 2024 (Table 1.1). The surveys coincided with the end of the moulting season for harbour seals, when the number of hauled-out seals are considered to be highest and therefore allow a good assessment of haul-out locations in the river. Variability in location over the tidal cycle was also incorporated by taking observations during both the low and high tides on each survey.
- 1.2.4 Dates were chosen for each survey to ensure the surveys occurred on similar tides. The tidal heights for each survey are shown in Table 1.1.

Table 1.1 Survey dates and tidal conditions

Survey	Dates (2024)	Approximate tide times (24 hour)	Approximate tide heights (m)
September	19 th September	Low – 0600 High – 1300	Low – 0.49 High – 5.35
October	15 th October	High – 1015 Low – 1550	Low – 0.53 High – 4.87
November	19 th November	Low – 0809 High – 1330	Low – 0.69 High – 5.06

1.3 Findings

Location and abundance of seals

- 1.3.1 On all three surveys, seals were most concentrated in the mouth of the River Stour, hauled-out on the banks (Figure 6.4.4.4.A1 Harbour seals observed during September – November 2024 surveys). During the September and November surveys, seals were only observed on the western bank of the river. However, during October, seals were resting on both the western and eastern banks. Numbers of hauled-out seals were highest on the low tides during all surveys (Table 1.2). A small number of seals were observed in the water in the river and occasional seals were also observed in the wider Pegwell Bay.
- 1.3.2 The findings of each survey have shown a similar number of seals present during September (maximum 66 seals), October (maximum 60 seals) and November

(maximum 22 seals) (Table 1.2). It is assumed that the same individuals were present on low and high tides.

- 1.3.3 The most abundant species observed was harbour seal, with only a small number (maximum four) of grey seals observed on each survey (Table 1.2). Number of seals observed in September and October were similar. However, during the November surveys, the numbers of seals present on both the low tide and the high tide were much lower in comparison. This may be due to poor weather conditions which occurred during the November survey compared to September and October.

Table 1.2 Abundance of hauled-out seals during September to November 2024 surveys in River Stour

Survey	Tide	Number of harbour seals	Number of grey seals	Total number of seals
September	Low	66	0	66
	High	44	0	44
October	Low	60	0	60
	High	38	0	38
November	Low	22	0	22
	High	9	0	9

Seal behaviour

September

- 1.3.4 During low tide on the September survey, the majority of seals were observed resting on the sandy, muddy, northern banks of the River Stour. At high tide seals were observed further up the shore within the saltmarsh habitat, resting in shallow waters with their heads and hind flippers raised in the air.
- 1.3.5 Small numbers of seals were present within the water, seemingly socialising with each other.

October

- 1.3.6 During the October survey, seals were observed resting on both the northern and southern banks of the River Stour particularly during low tide. The seals appeared to be slightly more active, with more movement between the banks and the water observed. Seals were also observed moving around on the banks more compared to September, when seals present on the banks were resting.
- 1.3.7 Seals present in the water were observed socialising with each other, similarly to the September survey.

November

- 1.3.8 During the November survey, seals were only observed on the northern banks of the River Stour. During low tide seals were observed mostly resting on the banks, However, during the high tide, there was a higher proportion of seals present in the water, socialising with each other.

1.4 Summary

- 1.4.1 The highest concentration of seals during all three surveys was identified in the River Stour, with only a very small number of seals occasionally present outside of the river in Pegwell Bay. This indicates that the mouth of the River Stour provides important habitat for seals, particularly harbour seals. The results of the survey also indicated that seal presence in the location of the Kent landfall and within the red line boundary of construction activities is low.

1.5 References

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SCOS. (2022). *Scientific Advice on Matters Related to the Management of Seal Populations: 2022*. Natural Environment Research Council - Special Committee on Seals.

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National Grid plc
National Grid House,
Warwick Technology Park,
Gallows Hill, Warwick.
CV34 6DA United Kingdom

Registered in England and Wales
No. 4031152
nationalgrid.com