

Date: 06 October 2025
Your ref: ENO20026



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Dear Sarah Holmes

Application by National Grid for an Order Granting Development Consent for the Sea Link Energy Cable Project – Rule 6 Letter

Thank you for your consultation dated 19 September 2025. The following constitutes Natural England's formal statutory response to the Rule 6 Letter. Natural England is an Interested Party (IP) to the examination of the Sea Link Energy Cable Project.

Please accept this letter as Natural England's comments in relation to the contents of the Rule 6 letter and an overview of how Natural England proposes to provide our statutory advice to the Examining Authority (ExA) during the examination phase of the project.

1. Overview of Natural England's engagement with the Examination

Natural England recognises the significant contribution NSIPs make to delivering the Government's green energy ambitions and net zero target, and the importance of our advice in securing positive environmental outcomes. Natural England is currently engaging on a number of NSIP projects during and post examination. Over the previous year a series of overlapping examinations have created a significant increase in our statutory duties.

Whilst Natural England remains committed to engaging in NSIP examinations and meeting our statutory obligations, we need to address the workload pressures presented by these overlapping projects. By undertaking a review of previous contributions to NSIP examinations, we have identified how we can best focus our advice to ensure we are able to engage efficiently and effectively, and have the greatest likelihood of achieving issue resolution. The approach we will be taking, which we have discussed with the Planning Inspectorate, will involve:

- Only attending Issue Specific Hearings by exception, and focusing our engagement where there is the greatest prospect of significant environmental risks being resolved.
- Not engaging in the Statement of Common Ground process and instead focusing primarily on Principal Areas of Disagreement Summary Statements (PADSS) and our Risk & Issues Log.

In addition, we are also concerned that if there is submission of substantial new evidence, particularly if occurring late in the Examination process, this will put further pressure on Natural England's staff. Whilst we seek to meet Examination timeframes wherever possible, our concern is that our ability to do this will be affected if significant additional information is submitted. In these circumstances, Natural England will use its best endeavours but we will provide advice to the Examining Authority on what we consider is achievable in the circumstances.

2. Attendance of the Preliminary Meeting

Thank you for your invitation to the Preliminary Meeting on the 5 November 2025. Natural England will not be attending but hope this letter will suffice in providing our input into this meeting.

3. Accompanied Site Inspections (ASI)

Natural England does not plan to attend any site inspections, noting we are not permitted to provide advice during these visits.

4. Compulsory Acquisition Hearings (CAH)

Natural England does not plan to attend any Compulsory Acquisition Hearings, as these fall outside of our remit.

5. Issue Specific Hearings (ISH)

Natural England will only attend hearings by exception, targeting those ISH that have the greatest likelihood of resolving significant environmental risks. In such instances our attendance will be virtual. We highlight that where Natural England does not attend hearings, this should not be construed as a lack of concern on outstanding issues, as opposed to the likelihood of these being resolved.

Natural England would be pleased to respond to any questions from the ExA that arise from the hearings at a subsequent deadline.

As regards the first set of hearings, to date we are not aware of any significant progression of key issues since the submission of our combined Relevant Representations and Written Representations, and we are not aware of any new information from the Applicant that is proposed to be discussed in the initial hearings. Therefore, we will not be attending Issue Specific Hearing 1 (OFH1) on Tuesday 11th November 2025. Natural England will not attend any Open Floor Hearings as they are not relevant to our function.

6. Engagement with the Applicant

During the Examination Natural England will, where possible, engage with the Applicant to ensure issues are progressed. Due to the timing implications of multiple NSIP examinations, Natural England will focus our engagement on key issues where the proposals are being amended in response to concerns, or where new or updated assessments present an opportunity for issue resolution.

7. Statement of Common Ground (SoCG), Principal Areas of Disagreement Summary Statements (PADSS) and other progress tracking documents

Natural England will submit our Risk and Issues log at Deadline 1, and updates to the log will be provided at all subsequent Deadlines. This will include any relevant points regarding ongoing engagement with the Applicant. We hope this will be of assistance to the ExA in understanding Natural England's current outstanding issues and on demonstrating progress on issue resolution.

Natural England observe that the ExA intends to request an initial PADSS at Deadline 1, followed by updated versions at Deadline 3 and Deadline 5. A final PADSS is requested at Deadline 7. Our Risks and Issues log, updated at every deadline, will include updates to the PADSS. Natural England advises that we will not engage in the production of a SoCG, in favour of focussing on issue resolution and the use of our Risks and Issues log to ensure regular updates are provided to the ExA on all issues.

8. Response to Deadlines

Throughout the examination it is anticipated that many documents will be submitted and published on the PINS website. Natural England will screen all documents; however, we will only conduct detailed review and provide feedback on documents deemed relevant to our statutory function and the issues we have raised. We will advise the ExA in writing at each Deadline of which documents we have reviewed. If there is a document Natural England has not reviewed that the ExA wishes to have our advice on, then please inform us as soon as possible and we will endeavour to review ahead of the next Deadline or advise at which Deadline comments can be expected. Any documents not listed within our Deadline responses should be assumed to have not undergone detailed review by Natural England.

9. Submission of Additional Information

Provision of large amounts of new or updated information during the Examination presents major challenges for consultees, particularly when engaged with multiple overlapping cases. Whilst Natural England will always make best endeavours to respond to submissions in a timely fashion, it cannot be guaranteed that all documents submitted will be reviewed by the following Deadline. Regularly updated information from the Applicant regarding the predicted submissions and arrival times can help manage this to some extent and we encourage the ExA to seek this.

Furthermore, Natural England will not provide a response to documents allowed to be submitted into Examination 'between' Deadlines. Should there be documents submitted between Deadlines, we suggest these are issued at the next appropriate Deadline, and we will respond at the following Deadline, or if time does not allow the subsequent Deadline.

10. Submissions of other parties

We highlight that Natural England does not intend to comment on any direct responses by the Applicant or other IPs on our representations unless new technical information is included.

More generally, Natural England will not respond on the submissions of other parties unless we become aware of a fundamental point of clarity which is required. Our focus will be on providing advice under our remit on nature conservation concerns, rather than advising on the merits of the submissions of others.

11. Report on the Implications for European Sites (RIES)

Natural England notes that only submissions up to Deadline 5 will be considered in the RIES. As a result the RIES will not take account of updated advice on various Habitats Regulations Assessments (HRA) aspects beyond that point. Natural England recommends that the RIES is updated before it is included alongside the ExA report to the Secretary of State (SoS), so that a full account of the Examination's consideration of HRA matters is presented in one place.

Nevertheless, as previously advised to PINS and BEIS, Natural England does not consider consultation on the RIES adequately discharges the statutory requirement to consult Natural England on Appropriate Assessments.

12. Draft Examination Timetable

Natural England has reviewed the draft examination timetable and has some concerns with some of the deadlines. Please see our detailed comments below:

- Natural England notes there is a Deadline 1A for written summaries of oral submissions at ISH 1. We note that part deadlines normally indicate an additional deadline added after the start of examination. For clarity we query if this should simply be noted as Deadline 2 with subsequent deadlines renumbered.
- Deadline 3 (7th January) coincides with the festive break. The ExA first written questions are to be responded to by this deadline, however, the questions are to be received on 17th December. It should be noted that due to pre booked leave, the significant number of public holidays during Christmas and New Year and Natural England offices being closed during this time, it is unlikely that we will be able to provide a full response at Deadline 3. We recommend the deadline is pushed back to Friday the 9th January. However, even with this extension it may not be possible to respond to all questions, in this event Natural England will respond to all questions we are able to and provide a response to any remaining questions at Deadline 4.
- Further to the above, we note Deadline 3 is also for response to the Applicant's change request due to be submitted in November. This may include review of significant updates to ES chapters. Natural England will make best endeavours to respond by the requested Deadline, but if this is not possible, we will respond at Deadline 4.
- Natural England notes that the Report on the Implications for European Sites (RIES) is due to be published on 17th February with responses requested by Deadline 5 (10th March). This provides

3 weeks to respond to a significant document. It is our experience that responses to the RIES are often significant in size and require detailed technical input. Therefore, we may not be able to provide a full response in such a timeframe. We will make best endeavours to respond by Deadline 5 but may need to provide some further response at Deadline 6.

- Natural England notes that Deadline 6 is 8th April, due to the Easter public holidays our response time will be reduced. However, we will make best endeavours to respond to all matters by the requested Deadline.
- Natural England notes that Deadline 7 (23rd April) is 6 working days prior to the end of examination. We note this may provide some leeway to extend some deadlines.

We hope these comments assist the ExA at the Preliminary Hearing. For any queries relating to the content of this letter please contact me using the details provided below.

Yours sincerely

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