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JNCC Reference: OIA-11381

JNCC Registration ID Number: [REDACTED]

PINS Reference: EN020026

Date: 10 March 2026

By email: southeastanglialink@planninginspectorate.gov.uk

To whom it may concern,

Sea Link Project Development Consent Order Application – Environmental Statement and Management Plans – EN020026 – Response to Examiners Questions 2

Thank you for consulting JNCC on the Sea Link Project Development Consent Order (DCO) Application including the Environmental Statement (ES) and Management Plans. Notification of acceptance for examination by the Secretary of State for Energy Security and Net Zero was received on 23 April 2025.

The Sea Link Interconnector project is proposed by National Grid Electricity Transmission plc to reinforce the transmission network in the South East and East Anglia. The new HVDC offshore cable will be 130km in length and is completely within the UK inshore region (within 12nm of the coast). This means that the cable falls within the jurisdiction of Natural England. However, the cable passes through two jointly managed sites (between JNCC and Natural England) described below:

- The Southern North Sea (SNS) Special Area of Conservation (SAC), designated for the protection of harbour porpoise. The conservation objectives for the site are to maintain site integrity by ensuring:
 1. Harbour porpoise are a viable component of the site
 2. There is no significant disturbance of the species
 3. The condition of supporting habitats and processes, and the availability of prey is maintained
- The Outer Thames Estuary Special Protection Area (SPA), designated for the protection of red-throated diver, common tern and little tern. The conservation objectives of the site are to maintain or enhance favourable condition of the features.

JNCC have therefore concentrated our comments on the features of these two designated sites. There were only questions related to marine mammals in this round of Examiners Questions and so we have concentrated our comments on this topic.

The advice contained within this minute is provided by JNCC as part of our statutory advisory role to the UK Government and devolved administrations on issues relating to nature conservation in UK offshore waters (beyond the territorial limit). We have subsequently concentrated our comments on aspects of the documents that we believe relate to offshore waters and defer to comments provided by Natural England (NE) for aspects relating to inshore waters (within 12nm).

The advice below relates to marine mammals only and is captured under the following headings:

- Marine mammals

The following documents were reviewed in providing this response:

- EN020026-002779-Sealink ExQ2

We have listed the question being answered in bold above our response.

1 Marine mammals

Q. 2MM3.

Peak abundance and density estimates

NE's risk and issues log [REP4-197] requests further information from the applicant regarding the seasonality of the peak abundance and density estimates. The applicant provided further narrative on the implications of the use of the Winter SCANS 2025 harbour porpoise abundance data in Revision D of the HRA Report [REP4-057]. It concluded in response to 1MM7 [REP3-069] that the revised baseline did not change the overall outcomes of the assessment as the numbers estimated to be disturbed were still significantly lower than the threshold criteria for impacts to harbour porpoise SACs. Do the JNCC and NE agree with this conclusion?

JNCC Response

With the Applicant now providing the updated baseline using the Winter SCANS 2025 density estimates and updating the assessment, JNCC agrees with the conclusion as outlined in Section 7.3.22 of Application Document 6.6 (E) Habitats and Regulations Assessment Report (pp108).

Q.2MM5.

Southern North Sea Special Area of Conservation (SNS SAC)

With regards to conservation objective 3, the applicant has calculated that <0.01% of that habitat of the SNS SAC could be affected by the proposed development and considers that the impact pathways relating to effects to prey species can be screened out in response to 1MM12 [REP4-083]. The MMO has also confirmed that further to

consultation with the Centre for Environment, Fisheries and Aquaculture, it agrees with the applicant's conclusion of no likely significant effects. Further to this explanation, does the JNCC agree with the applicant's conclusions of no likely significant effects to harbour porpoise of the SNS SAC as a result of impacts to prey species?

JNCC Response

We acknowledge the confirmation from the MMO in consultation with Cefas that they agree with the Applicant's conclusion. JNCC will provide a response in terms of these conclusions following the Applicant's submission of an update to the Habitats Regulations Assessment Report at Deadline 5 as outlined in REP4-083 (pp.145 1MM12). We note the Applicant states that more detail regarding the scale of impact has been added to paragraph 9.3.35 in Application Document 6.2.4.4 (G) Marine Chapter 4 Marine Mammals, submitted at Deadline 4, however this does not appear within the latest version.

Q.2MM6.

Outline Marine Mammal Mitigation Plan (oMMMP)

The JNCC [RR-2635], [REP1-210] made several comments on the oMMMP. The applicant has made several revisions to the oMMMP, the most recent being [REP4-069]. Can the JNCC confirm whether it is satisfied with the revisions made?

JNCC Response

JNCC confirm we are satisfied with the revisions to the oMMMP (REP4-069) and provide the following advice in response to the updated plan.

- We welcome the Applicant's reference to obtaining a separate license for UXO detonation (if required) in Section 1.4.1 of the oMMMP and are satisfied with this approach. We are content that the final MMMP will be updated with mitigation for this activity following JNCC guidance at the relevant time.
- JNCC reiterates our previous comments regarding the Applicant's use of noise management guidance in harbour porpoise SACs (JNCC 2020 and 2025). While the latest oMMMP (REP4-069) lists the guidance in Section 1.5.2, we highlight the need for the final mitigation plan to reflect the most up to date information on other activities occurring in the site at the same time. Additionally, we expect developer liaison via the MMO coordination groups to prevent seasonal disturbance thresholds being breached. We note that our comments regarding this guidance and proposed measures for red throated divers do not appear to have been addressed in any resubmitted documents.
- Within the oMMMP the Applicant states that specific measures in relation to UXO detonation will be updated when the EPS licence application is made (Section 1.10.2, pp.13). We highlight that a separate HRA will also be required if UXOs identified for detonation are located within the SNS SAC. In addition, Section 1.10.2 states ".....since current guidance to minimise harm to marine mammals has recently been updated and was out for comment in draft form at the time of writing." We highlight the JNCC guidance to reduce the risk of injury during UXO clearance was published in January 2025 and can be accessed via our resource hub.

- Please note the UXO Joint Position Statement in Table 1.1 is incorrectly referenced as HM Government, 2026; this statement was published in January 2025.

Q2MM7.

Further to the applicant's response in Table 3.8 of [REP2-016] is the JNCC satisfied that compliance with International Regulations for Preventing Collisions at Sea 1972 (International Maritime Organisation 1972) is sufficient to ensure slow vessel speeds and reach a conclusion of no likely significant effects to marine mammals for vessel collision risk?

JNCC Response

JNCC are satisfied that the Applicant's commitment to comply with International Regulations for Preventing Collisions at Sea 1972 (International Maritime Organisation 1972) is sufficient to ensure slow vessel speeds and reach a conclusion of no likely significant effects to marine mammals for vessel collision risk. We note that this is now included within paragraph 4.9.42 (REP4-032) and within the updated oMMMP.

Please contact me with any questions regarding the above comments.

Yours sincerely,

████████████████████

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2 References

JNCC (2017). JNCC guidelines for minimising the risk of injury to marine mammals from geophysical surveys (seismic survey guidelines). Available at:

<https://jncc.gov.uk/resources/e2a46de5-43d4-43f0-b296-c62134397ce4>