



THE PLANNING ACT 2008

THE INFRASTRUCTURE PLANNING (EXAMINATION PROCEDURE) RULES
2010

Sea Link Energy Cable

**Appendix A8 for Natural England's combined response to the Deadline 7 documents
and to the All Interested Parties – Invitation to Comment
Natural England's Advice on Suffolk Onshore Ecology**

For:

The construction and operation of the Sea Link Energy Cable.

Planning Inspectorate Reference EN020026

21st October 2026

Appendix A8 for Natural England's combined response to the Deadline 7 documents and to the All Interested Parties – Invitation to Comment

Suffolk Onshore Ecology

In formulating these comments, the following documents have been considered:

Sea Link Deadline 7 Submission Documents:

- [REP7-120] 6.6 (I) Habitats Regulations Assessment Report (Tracked)
- [REP7-258] 9.149.1 Applicant's Comments on Natural England Risk and Issues_Log Deadline 6
- [REP7-259] 9.150 Applicant's Comments on Responses to Third Written Questions
- [REP7-360] 9.84 (F) Register of Environmental Actions and Commitments (REAC) (Tracked)

Natural England has also reviewed the following documents, and has no further comments regarding Suffolk Onshore:

- [REP7-108] 6.3.2.2.B (D) Appendix 2.2.B Suffolk Wintering Bird Report (Tracked Changes)
- [REP7-094] 6.2.2.2 (F) Part 2 Suffolk Chapter 2 Ecology and Biodiversity (Tracked)
- [REP7-110] 6.3.2.2.C (C) Appendix 2.2.C Suffolk Breeding Bird Report (Tracked Changes)
- [REP7-118] 6.4.2.2.B ES Figures Suffolk Wintering Bird Report 2022-23 and 2023-24 part 1 of 2 (B) (Tracked)
- [REP7-130] 7.5.3 (E) Outline Onshore Construction Environmental Management Plan (Tracked Changes)
- [REP7-149] 9.17.1 (D) Suffolk Drainage Strategy (Tracked Changes)
- [REP7-347] 7.12.1 (D) Design Principles – Suffolk (Tracked)

Sea Link Deadline 6 Submission Documents – Natural England has previously provided comments at Deadline 7 in Appendix A7, however have reviewed these documents further and provided further comments in this Appendix.

- [REP6-067] 7.5.10.1 (B) Outline Soil Management Plan – Suffolk (Tracked Changes)

Sea Link All Interested Parties – Invitation to comment Documents:

- EN020026-003932-C1-216 9.84 (G) Register of Environmental Actions and Commitments (REAC) (Tracked)
- EN020026-003914-C1-198 - 7.5.7.1 (F) Outline Landscape and Ecological Management Plan - Suffolk (Tracked)

Natural England has also reviewed the following documents and has no further comments regarding Suffolk Onshore:

- EN020026-003924-C1-208 - 9.157 Suffolk Landfall Trenchless Installation Depth Assessment Technical Note
- EN020026-003913-C1-197 - 7.5.3 (F) Outline Onshore Construction Environmental Management Plan (Tracked)

1. Summary

Natural England's concerns over impacts of lighting to bats remains. Our specific comments on this issue are provided in the tables below.

In addition, it appears that there has been no further consideration of discharges to the Alde-Ore Estuary designated sites. Our advice remains that a robust monitoring programme is required to ensure that runoff does not result in impacts. This remains a red issue in our Risk and Issue Log.

Based on information provided, Natural England is now satisfied that there will be no further impact on woodlark and nightjar features of Sandlings Special Protection Area (SPA) as a result of light spill from the construction compound.

1. Detailed Comments

Table 1: Natural England's advice on Suffolk Onshore

Document reviewed: [REP7-120] 6.6 (I) Habitats Regulations Assessment Report (Tracked)			
NE Ref	Section	Key Concern and/or Update	Natural England's Advice to Resolve Issue
1	7.2.4	Loss Of Functionally Linked Land (FLL) for Sandlings SPA. We note that the Habitats Regulations Assessment (HRA) has been updated to include the quantum of FLL lost for the Suffolk Onshore Scheme for Sandlings SPA. The scheme will affect 7.5ha of foraging habitat.	Natural England is content that the quantum of FLL lost has been confirmed.
2	5.2.8	The tracked changes refer to a Natural England IRZ guidance document which is incorrectly quoted. This notes that heathland birds generally forage within 2km of a site boundary, but nightjars can forage up to 4km. It is therefore incorrect to say that 2km is the maximum foraging distance. It is unlikely to change the conclusion regarding Lion Link, however this error should be corrected.	Reference to the Natural England IRZ guidance document should be corrected to include a foraging distance of up to 4km for Nightjars and evidence updated accordingly.
3	8.24	Clarification: In Combination impacts This paragraph cites that '<i>For the temporary duration of works affecting Sandlings SPA this will be offset by Sea Link leaving an area of arable land on sandy soils fallow and/or seeding it as acid grassland to be maintained for 10 years.</i>' Natural England requests that the applicant clarify if this refers to the 6Ha area of grassland (Commitment B28)	It is Natural England's understanding that the 6ha area was not required to rule out an adverse effect on integrity for the loss of 7.5ha of foraging habitat for Sandlings SPA for impacts alone, however it remains included within 8.2.4. We request clarity on whether this included for in combination impacts.

Table 2: Natural England's advice on Suffolk Onshore

Document reviewed: [REP7-258] 9.149.1 Applicant's Comments on Natural England Risk and Issues Log_Deadline 6
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NE Ref	Section	Key Concern and/or Update	Natural England's Advice to Resolve Issue
1		Natural England notes that commitment B38 in 9.84 (G) Register of Environmental Actions and Commitments (REAC) addresses direct illumination of boundary features and references 'Bats and Artificial Lighting in the UK' Guidance note GN08. Natural England advises that the impacts of indirect lighting should also be considered. The current version of guidance note GN08 suggests that in situations where complete darkness is required, it may be appropriate to consider this to be where illuminance is at or below 0.2 lux on the horizontal plane, and at or below 0.4 lux on the vertical plane. These 'complete darkness' conditions should be followed for all features of importance to bats, regardless of whether the illumination is direct or indirect.	Impacts of indirect lighting need to be considered, following guidance within GN08 that suggests illuminance at or below 0.2 lux in the horizontal plane and 0.4 lux in the vertical plane as appropriate limits.
2	A3	The applicant references commitment B30 stating there will be a minimum setback of 20m of construction compounds from the hedge used by barbastelle. Natural England advises that it is not necessarily the distance between the commuting hedge and the construction compound that is relevant, but the level of hedge illumination from the compound. Please see comments above.	Impacts of indirect lighting need to be considered, following guidance within GN08 that suggests illuminance at or below 0.2 lux in the horizontal plane and 0.4 lux in the vertical plane as appropriate limits.
3	A3	Natural England requests that the need for permanent operational lighting is appropriately justified, given the likely negative impact of the permanent Converter Station operational lighting to bats. As discussed above, the main issue is the resulting lux level of surrounding light spill, combined with the level of bat importance of the illuminated habitat.	Justification should be provided for the need for permanent overhead lighting. The impact of this should also be considered in line with above comments.
4	A3	1 lux illumination still has the potential to negatively impact commuting/foraging bats. It would be helpful to know the distance required in order to result in illumination of 0.2 lux or less in the horizontal plane. This distance should then be used between the source of illumination and habitats	Further consideration is required on the impact of lighting on bats, given the advice provided in the above comments.

		of importance to bats. There would be no requirement to use this distance if the habitat is not deemed to be important to bats. The importance of the habitat should be appropriately evidenced and justified	
5	A21	Please note that this comment is only in relation to impacts on woodlark and nightjar, as features of Sandlings SPA. Natural England notes that the lighting plans referenced by the applicant show that the 1 lux contour does not appear to extend beyond the compound. We conclude that this, therefore, means that the 3m fence is sufficient to reduce light spill. We, therefore, advise that the proposed measures are sufficient.	

Table 3: Natural England's advice on Suffolk Onshore

Document reviewed: [REP7-259] 9.150 Applicant's Comments on Responses to Third Written Questions			
NE Ref	Section	Key Concern and/or Update	Natural England's Advice to Resolve Issue
1	3ECOL7	Natural England understands that the bat assemblage has been downgraded from national to regional based on level of use. However, information from the applicant suggests that the methodology used does not consider the level of activity of individual species. If, as suggested, the assessment of effects, the conclusions reached, and the mitigation proposed would not change based on the assigned level of importance of the bat assemblage, there is no disadvantage in reclassifying the bat assemblage as 'national' importance. Therefore, this reclassification should be done.	We continue to advise that the importance of the bat assemblage should be reclassified as 'national' importance.
2	3ECOL19	In response to 3ECOL19 we welcome that impacts to water vole from frac out have been included in paragraph 2.9.25 of Document 6.2.2.2 (F) Part 2 Suffolk Chapter 2 Ecology	

		and Biodiversity and that commitment B09 of 9.84 (G) Register of Environmental Actions and Commitments (REAC).	
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Table 4: Natural England's advice on Suffolk Onshore

Document reviewed: EN020026-003932-C1-216 9.84 (G) Register of Environmental Actions and Commitments (REAC) (Tracked)			
NE Ref	Section	Key Concern and/or Update	Natural England's Advice to Resolve Issue
1	NV07	We note that commitment NV07, regarding noise impacts from Saxmundham and Friston substations has been completely removed, however, the reasoning for this is unclear.	We request that justification is provided for removing NV07 from the REAC.
2	B62	We note and welcome that commitment B62 has been updated to include water vole surveys.	We are content that this issue is resolved. We advise that surveys should follow the methodology described on pages 29-32 of the Water Vole Conservation Handbook (third edition) (Strachan et al., 2011). In particular, we highlight the recommendation that Environmental Assessment should be based on two field surveys at either end of the season. Surveys immediately following management works can be misleading and should be avoided. Latrine counts can be used to give an indication of the strength of a water vole colony and hence help plan appropriate mitigation/compensation.
3	B38	We note that commitment B38 addresses direct illumination of boundary features and references 'Bats and Artificial Lighting in the UK' Guidance note GN08. Natural England advises that the impacts of indirect lighting should also be considered.	The current version of guidance note GN08 suggests that in situations where complete darkness is required, it may be appropriate to consider this to be where illuminance is at or below 0.2 lux on the horizontal plane, and at or below 0.4 lux on the vertical plane. These 'complete darkness'

			conditions should be followed for all features of importance to bats, regardless of whether the illumination is direct or indirect
4	B30	B30 states that ' <i>A minimum 20 m setback of construction compounds from the hedge used by barbastelle which connects Important Hedgerows 3 and 5 as shown in Application Document 6.4.2.2.A.7 Suffolk Important Hedgerows will be instituted.</i> ' Natural England advises that it is not necessarily the distance between the commuting hedge and the construction compound that is relevant, but the level of hedge illumination from the compound. Please see comments above.	As above.

Table 5: Natural England's advice on Suffolk Onshore

Document reviewed: [REP6-067] 7.5.10.1 (B) Outline Soil Management Plan – Suffolk (Tracked Changes)			
NE Ref	Section	Key Concern and/or Update	Natural England's Advice to Resolve Issue
1		The revised Outline Soil Management Plans represent a substantial improvement and now provide a credible framework for soil protection, handling, reinstatement and aftercare. They broadly reflect the principles of the Defra <i>Construction Code of Practice for the Sustainable Use of Soils on Construction Sites</i> , particularly through the proposed soil-resource planning, segregation of horizons, moisture-based handling controls, stockpile management, specialist supervision and monitoring. The Code remains relevant government guidance, although it dates from 2009 and has not subsequently been reviewed or updated.	The following matters should be addressed or clarified in the final SMPs. 1. Final SMPs should be secured as operational documents. The final SMPs should be completed, reviewed by a suitably qualified Soil Scientist and approved through the relevant DCO requirement before any activity capable of disturbing or compacting soil begins, not merely before formal soil stripping. This should include enabling works, archaeological investigation, ecological mitigation, fencing, drainage installation, haul-road formation and compound establishment.

	However, the documents remain <u>outline plans</u> and defer a considerable amount of essential site-specific information to final SMPs prepared by the works contractors. Consequently, their effectiveness depends on the deferred measures being clearly secured, completed before any soil-disturbing work and subject to appropriate technical review and enforcement. Natural England welcomes the strengthened commitments in the clean oSMPs, including: completion of outstanding ALC and Soil Resources Surveys before construction; preparation of mapped soil-handling units; calculation and tracking of topsoil and subsoil volumes; separate handling and storage of soil horizons and soil types; appointment of a suitably qualified Soil Scientist; field assessment of soil plasticity before handling; defined responsibilities, inspections, reporting and corrective action; and preparation of parcel-specific aftercare arrangements, potentially extending for up to five years. These provisions go some way towards addressing the principal concern identified in our previous SoS, namely that the ALC surveys provided baseline information but did not previously demonstrate how it would be translated into secured soil handling, reinstatement, supervision and monitoring requirements. Nevertheless, there are a number of key matters which should be addressed or clarified in the final SMPs.	The current oSMPs state that their controls apply to early works, but also describe the final SMP as being required before soil stripping. This creates a possible gap during which soils could be trafficked, compacted or otherwise disturbed before the detailed controls are in place. Approval should not rely solely on contractor preparation and acceptance by National Grid. The secured process should provide for appropriate consultation or independent technical scrutiny where the final SMP materially changes the outline controls. 2. Survey gaps and soil-resource characterisation The commitments to complete outstanding ALC surveys and undertake Soil Resources Surveys are supported. However, the wording “as far as necessary and practicable” should not allow survey gaps to remain within land that will be temporarily or permanently disturbed. The final SMPs should demonstrate that: • all land subject to stripping, excavation, trafficking, compounds, haul roads, drainage works or permanent development has sufficient soil information; • each principal soil type has been characterised through representative soil profiles, not only composite chemical sampling; • topsoil, upper subsoil and lower subsoil depths are mapped; • structural condition, drainage characteristics, texture, stone content and relevant chemical properties are recorded; and
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			• each mapped soil unit is linked to a defined stripping, storage and restoration prescription. This is particularly important in Suffolk, where the earlier response identified that a substantial part of the Grade 2 resource remained predicted rather than field verified. 3. A clear Soil Resource Plan is required The Defra Code places strong emphasis on understanding the soil resource and preparing a Soil Resource Plan before construction. The final SMPs should therefore include an integrated plan showing: • soil and ALC units; • areas to remain undisturbed; • stripping depths for each horizon; • soil volumes and anticipated balance; • stockpile locations and identifiers; • haul routes and plant movement; • intended soil destination and end use; • proposed restoration profiles; and • areas where ecological soil specifications differ from agricultural restoration requirements. The oSMPs list many of these elements, but they should form a single auditable system linking each soil unit from its original location through stripping, storage and reinstatement.
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			4. Wet and plastic soil handling The default requirement to handle soils when dry and friable, together with field plasticity testing and rainfall cessation criteria, is appropriate and consistent with the Code. However, paragraph 6.1.6 in both documents allows soils to be handled in a plastic condition for programme or engineering reasons. This exception should be substantially tightened. Programme pressure should not, by itself, justify knowingly damaging a finite soil resource. Handling plastic soil can cause compaction, smearing, loss of structure and impaired drainage that may not be fully corrected through subsequent reconditioning. The final controls should require: • handling of plastic soils only where essential for safety or an overriding engineering necessity; • written justification and approval by the Soil Scientist before work begins; • identification of alternatives considered; • a location-specific method statement; • separate storage and traceability of affected soil; • defined reconditioning and verification measures; and • formal recording as a departure or non-conformance. Where soils cannot be handled without unacceptable damage, the appropriate response should normally be cessation and rescheduling rather than reliance on later remediation. 5. Machinery selection should respond to soil conditions
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			The oSMPs permit hydraulic excavators or tracked dozers and include generic stripping and replacement methodologies. The final SMPs should avoid prescribing machinery solely by operation type. Machinery and working methods should instead be selected according to soil texture, moisture condition, bearing capacity, horizon thickness and site constraints. This is especially important for the heavier Melford, Ragdale, Hanslope and Wallasea soils in Suffolk. The Defra Code promotes dry-condition working, appropriate tracked equipment and confinement of trafficking to designated routes. The final SMPs should therefore specify: • acceptable machinery for each soil-handling unit; • limits on dozer to reinstating the topsoil only; subsoils should be loose tipped in accordance sheet K (Soils Guidance) • plant operating surfaces; • maximum trafficking and turning restrictions; • measures to avoid travel over restored soil; and • alternative low-ground-pressure or excavator-based methods where necessary. 6. Stockpile specifications The principles of separate, labelled and protected stockpiles close to their source are appropriate. However, the stated topsoil height of 3 to 4 m, with the possibility of greater heights where space is constrained, should be treated cautiously. Natural England advise
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		that final SMPs should establish maximum heights and construction methods according to: 1. Topsoils, subsoils and subsoil substitutes shall be stored separately. 2. Where continuous bunds are used dissimilar soils shall be separated by a third material, previously agreed in writing with the MPA. 3. Topsoil bunds shall not exceed 3 m in height and subsoil (or subsoil substitute) bunds shall not exceed 5 m in height. 4. Materials shall be stored like upon like, so that topsoil shall be stripped from beneath subsoil bunds and subsoil from beneath overburden bunds. All storage bunds intended to remain in situ for more than 6 months or over the winter period are to be grassed over and weed control and other necessary maintenance carried out to the satisfaction of the appointed soil scientist. An unrestricted ability to exceed the stated height because storage space is limited would not provide sufficient protection. Any departure should require written justification from the Soil Scientist, with corresponding monitoring and remedial provisions. Long-term stockpiles should be seeded, inspected and managed for erosion, weeds, ponding, contamination and unauthorised trafficking. 7. Restoration criteria should be measurable The commitment to return agricultural land to its pre-construction ALC grade is welcomed.
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			8. Aftercare should continue until performance criteria are achieved The proposed period of up to five years is appropriate as an outline commitment, but early completion should occur only where all agreed success criteria have been met. Conversely, provision should be made to extend remedial monitoring where drainage, compaction or crop-performance problems remain unresolved. For agricultural land, sign-off should normally require evidence over more than one season and should include landowner or occupier input. The oSMPs currently indicate that ALC verification may occur after a minimum of one to three seasons. That should be supplemented by annual soil-condition and agricultural-performance monitoring, rather than relying solely on a single final ALC survey. Location-specific emphasis Suffolk Particular emphasis should be placed on: 1. completing field verification of soil and ALC conditions in the unsurveyed area, especially where Grade 2 land is currently predicted; 2. preparing soil-resource units that distinguish the sandy southern soils from the heavier clayey and fine-loamy northern soils; 3. applying different handling and moisture controls to those contrasting resources;
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			4. reconciling soil-depth information before stripping specifications are finalised; and ensuring the final SMP does not treat the existing combined surveyed and predicted ALC dataset as a wholly field-verified baseline Natural England position: <i>Subject to the matters above, the Suffolk oSMP can be accepted as suitable outline frameworks. They now contain the principal components expected by the Defra Construction Code of Practice and respond positively to the earlier request for clearer soil handling, supervision, monitoring and aftercare provisions. However, they should not be treated as demonstrating successful soil protection or restoration in themselves. Their acceptability depends on securing comprehensive, site-specific final SMPs, completing the outstanding soil-resource information and establishing measurable restoration and aftercare criteria before soil-disturbing works commence.</i>
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