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Good afternoon,

Thank you for consulting Natural England on the updated bird surveys for planning application PA/2023/1124.

Natural England welcome the provision of additional bird data, covering the autumn passage period (August 2024-October 2024). We note that wintering bird survey data has been provided spanning October 2024-early December 2024. Natural England advise that wintering bird surveys should be undertaken between October to March inclusive. We therefore advise that surveys are continued to cover the full season. We note that March surveys were already completed in 2024, and therefore advise that bird surveys should continue until the end of February. We recommend that the surveys follow the Vantage Point Survey methodology detailed in Annex C and include the fields adjacent to the site.

Natural England welcomes the applicant's submission of raw bird survey data for five survey dates between the end of October 2024 and early December 2024, however we cannot provide comprehensive advice on this data as currently presented. This is due to limitations in the presentation of the results. Natural England advise that a more detailed survey methodology should be provided, including details of individual survey dates and times, and maps showing the area covered by the surveys/the transect routes walked. We advise that the full data are provided, including all bird counts. The survey results should provide some understanding of how the birds use the site (for example, for roosting or foraging) as well as presence/absence. We would expect to see commentary of birds landing and taking off within and outwith the development site, in addition to records of birds in flight. Suitably annotated maps showing how the area is used by all relevant Humber Estuary species recorded should be provided.

If you have any further questions about this consultation response, please do not hesitate to contact me.

Kind regards,  
Elen Squires

**Elen Squires** (she/her)

Higher Officer - Terrestrial Sustainable Development  
Yorkshire and Northern Lincolnshire Area Team

Natural England, 2<sup>nd</sup> Floor, Foss House, Kings Pool, 1-2 Peasholme Green, York, YO1 7PX

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## **Annex C: Passage and wintering bird surveys for functionally linked land associated with the Humber Estuary and/or Lower Derwent Valley designated sites (Version 1.1, December 2021)**

### ***Background***

The below guidance is intended to inform assessments of proposed development sites in proximity to the Humber Estuary and/or the Lower Derwent Valley designated sites only, where potential impacts from loss of/disturbance to functionally linked land (FLL) have been identified, for example due to presence of suitable habitat (such as arable land/grassland or open waterbodies) and/or relevant bird records and/or local knowledge.

Natural England recommends that surveys are undertaken of the site and surrounding fields to provide an overview of bird usage during wintering and spring/autumn passage periods.

We recommend that the surveys are carried out in line with the following best practice guidance. Where alternative approaches are used, clear justification should be provided.

Please note that recommended survey periods, frequency and design may differ for sites located within the boundaries of Humber Estuary or Lower Derwent Valley designated sites, or in proximity to other designated sites. Please contact Natural England in such cases.

### ***Survey periods and frequency***

Natural England recommends that surveys are completed at the following frequency:

- Autumn Passage – two surveys per month between August to October inclusive.
- Winter - two surveys per month between October to March inclusive.
- Spring Passage – two surveys per month between March - Mid-May inclusive.

We advise that spring and autumn passage surveys are completed (in addition to winter surveys) as the Humber Estuary and Lower Derwent Valley SPAs are important for species migrating between breeding and wintering sites. Further advice on seasonality for Humber Estuary SPA and Lower Derwent Valley SPA designated features can be found at [Designated Sites View \(naturalengland.org.uk\)](https://naturalengland.org.uk/designated-sites-view) and [UK9006092 Lower Derwent Valley SPA Published 14 Sep 2023 \(naturalengland.org.uk\)](https://naturalengland.org.uk/uk9006092-lower-derwent-valley-spa-published-14-sep-2023), respectively.

Weekly visits during the autumn and spring passage periods are recommended where birds are likely to be present in the migration period only, due to high turnover of birds during migration. Note that certain passage species, such as whimbrel associated with the Lower Derwent Valley SPA, may have specific survey requirements due to their migration behaviour. Please discuss such cases with Natural England.

Natural England recommends that two years of wintering and passage surveys should be completed in certain cases to provide a more robust understanding of SPA bird usage on the site and inform design of suitable mitigation, where relevant. This will depend on site-specific factors, for example where proposed development sites:

- are in very close proximity to the designated site/s; and/or
- have a large development footprint; and/or
- are expected/shown to have high bird sensitivity, especially where activity varies significantly between years; and/or
- existing bird records / expert advice demonstrates usage of the site by high numbers of SPA birds.

Please contact Natural England if you are unclear on whether two years of wintering and passage surveys are recommended for this proposal.

### ***Survey design***

Wintering/passage surveys should be designed to ensure that results are sufficient to provide a robust picture of distribution, abundance and regularity of use by waterbirds associated with the Humber Estuary and/or Lower Derwent Valley SPAs across the full extent of the proposed development site. Please refer to Annex B and/or Annex B1 for the non-breeding waterbird assemblage list for the Humber Estuary and Lower Derwent Valley SPA, respectively.

A detailed methodology should be included in the relevant report/s, including key information such as number of visits, date and time of visits, viewpoint locations and/or transect routes walked. The survey results should provide some understanding of how the birds use the site (for example, for roosting or foraging) as well as presence/ absence. We would expect to see commentary of birds landing and taking off within and outwith the development site. We also recommend recording birds in flight, particularly if the application may have the potential to affect bird flight lines.

Consideration should also be given to surveys in poor weather/ visibility conditions. Usual survey methodology is to avoid surveying in poor conditions due to potential reduced detectability of birds. However, use can vary in different weather conditions, so it may be helpful to carry on with surveys in poor weather. Weather conditions may affect the results of the surveys and therefore should be considered in assessing the robustness of the dataset.

In addition, details of wider weather conditions should be included, for example, where there may have been a particularly wet or cold season and this may change bird distribution across the area, due to frozen ground etc. Furthermore, a milder autumn may lead to wintering birds arriving later and vice versa in colder autumns.

The methodology should also consider whether the site has any seasonal features such as dips and low-lying areas that retain water at particular times, for example early in the season or in wet years. These areas may have importance for waders at these times, but if surveyed during a drier spell or where full passage/winter surveys have not been completed, it may be possible to underestimate the importance of the site.

For sites in close proximity to the Humber Estuary, the surveys should cover different tidal states. Use of sites closer to the estuary are more likely to be tidally influenced. For sites which may potentially affect high tide roosts, observations should be conducted from two hours before high tide to two hours after high tide. For sites where there are high tide roosts, it may be beneficial to have a series of counts at different heights of tides ("through the tide counts"), as some sites are only used on Spring tides and others are only used on Neap and low tides.

For sites in proximity to the Lower Derwent Valley, the surveys should cover different times of day and different flooding states in the valley. For example, during certain winter periods, the designated site may be extensively flooded and therefore usage of surrounding functionally linked land may be higher for wading birds.

The surveys should cover open arable land/grassland and any waterbodies within the proposed site boundary, as well as land adjacent to the development that could be affected and provides the potential to support designated site species. Where a site is adjacent to the Humber Estuary designated site, additional considerations may be required, for example

ensuring adequate surveys of intertidal habitats. Please contact Natural England in such cases.

Surveys may also need to take account of surveys at dusk and dawn, depending upon the bird species (i.e. geese and swans). If geese and swans have the potential to use the development site or surrounding area, we would expect to see surveys 1 hour before and 1 hour after, dusk and dawn during the respective bird survey season (i.e. winter, spring and autumn passage (as above)). These surveys should be in addition to the standard daytime survey but can be carried out on the same day. For example, a dawn survey to count geese or swans at their night-time roost could then extend into a survey of daytime use of fields for foraging.

Natural England generally recommends that observations from vantage points (VP) are used. VP surveys are considered preferable to walkover surveys for observing behaviour of birds on the ground (i.e., whether they are foraging/loafing etc.), and to minimise the risk of flushing birds due to movement of a surveyor during a walkover survey. Also, birds which may otherwise have landed in the field during the survey period may be unlikely to do so with the presence of a moving surveyor. If landscape features mean it is not possible to avoid walking through part of the survey area to get from one point count to another, this should be noted and the reaction of any birds present recorded, including any that are flushed.

Further guidance on vantage point surveys can be found at [Recommended bird survey methods to inform impact assessment of onshore windfarms | NatureScot](#). Natural England recognises that the NatureScot VP guidance is written for impacts associated with wind turbines. However, Natural England considers that the survey guidance detailed in Section 3.7 provides an appropriate methodology to identify distribution and abundance of birds to inform the assessment of other developments. We acknowledge that some of the information regarding the required watch hours and height considerations etc will not be relevant in the context of other developments. Therefore, site-specific considerations should be taken into account when designing the survey methods.

Where VP surveys are not considered appropriate for a particular site, clear reasoning and justification regarding the alternative survey methods undertaken should be provided.

Natural England has generally advised that if  $\geq 1\%$  of a Humber Estuary bird species population could be affected by a proposal, alone or in combination with other plans or projects, then further consideration is required. However, where species are particularly vulnerable due to declines in the Humber population, then it may not be appropriate to rely on the 1% of the estuary population as the critical threshold. Mitigation measures may be required where lower numbers of vulnerable species are using a site that is proposed for development.

### *Nocturnal surveys*

Wader and waterfowl usage of arable land/grassland outside designated sites can be substantially different at night. Therefore, Natural England recommends nocturnal surveys are also carried out if waders and/or waterfowl have the potential to use the development site. These surveys should be in addition to the standard daytime surveys. We recommend that several visits should be completed to determine if the site and/or surrounding areas play a regular role in supporting SPA species at night. Night vision/infra-red equipment and survey on moonlit nights can establish presence of nocturnal species or presence and direction of feeding/migration movements both by calls and by sight<sup>1</sup>.

Guidance on nocturnal surveys can be found at [Nocturnal bird surveys | Bird Survey Guidelines](#). The nocturnal survey design should take this guidance into account, and the approach should be justifiable in the assessment. It should be noted that for most species nocturnal activity is likely to be underestimated in any attempted survey<sup>1</sup>.

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<sup>1</sup> Scottish Natural Heritage: Recommended bird survey methods to inform impact assessment of onshore wind farms (March 2017- Version 2).