

Response to Natural England Guidance Note TIN069, *Assessing the effects of onshore wind farms on birds*. 7th January 2010.

Summary

Natural England have released guidance to developers and ecologists describing the survey methods and effort which will be recommended when considering the potential impacts of wind farms on bird populations.

The guidance updates established methods such as vantage point survey and breeding birds survey and also includes further survey such as mortality searches.

The guidance attempts to define small and large-scale developments that will be subject to differing levels of survey method and effort.

There are additional requirements including control/reference sites and post-construction monitoring.

To access a full copy of the guidance note TIN069 please go to our website at www.bakerconsultants.co.uk

Overview of process and method to date

Survey for birds at proposed wind farm sites has to date followed the method set out by Scottish Natural Heritage¹, this has normally included a site walkover to assess the habitat and scope out for further work, a breeding birds survey in the spring, 12 months of vantage point survey data (normally 6 hours each month at each vantage point) and winter walkover surveys. At times where a site is considered to be particularly sensitive for birds then further survey effort would be requested after consultation with Natural England. Although early consultation with Natural England and other interested parties such as the RSPB or Local Wildlife Trust is always advised, this can be problematic. Due in part to the sensitive nature of these developments but also because there is discrepancy between different Natural England offices with some willing to engage very early in the process and others unable to provide a response until the formal EIA scoping exercise, after which time the field work phase will have been partially or largely completed.

The SNH guidance although useful needed to be updated, not least to take into account the different landscapes and habitats in England where wind farms are proposed.

Issues arising from TIN069

Size of development

Large-scale wind farm developments which are likely to be subject to the full range of surveys and effort are defined at >5 turbines or with a generating capacity of >5MW. At the other end of the scale the guidance suggests that “very small” developments may be exempt from the majority of the work discussed, however “very small” is not as precisely defined as the large developments. The implications for projects which fall between “very small” and large is not clear from the guidance, it is assumed that this will be assessed on a case-by-case basis at the consultation stage.

Consultation

Early consultation with Natural England, the RSPB and other interested parties is recommended during the *selection of the development site*, i.e. prior to the commencement of any field survey work. We suggest that this is very important due to the variability in survey

¹ Scottish Natural Heritage (2006) *Survey methods for use in the assessment of the impacts of proposed on-shore wind farms and bird communities*.

method and effort that will be required for medium sized developments. This of course will make project planning and budgeting difficult for developers, as Ecologists will only be able to provide quotations and timing estimates for the pre-survey assessment and initial consultation elements of the work at this early stage.

Pre-survey assessment

Before the commencement of consultation and survey work a pre-survey assessment will need to take place. We anticipate that this will include the collation of desk study data and a site visit to assess habitat on-site and the surrounding area.

Key species

A list of key bird species likely to be affected by the installation of wind turbines is included in the guidance. The list includes species such as marsh harrier which, in our experience, commonly occur on proposed wind farm sites. When key species are present then further detailed survey is likely to be required which could extend the survey timetable or be subject to seasonal constraints.

Vantage Point Survey

VP survey effort has been suggested as 36 hours of watches at each vantage point for each of the three seasons outlined – November to March for Winter, mid-March to July for breeding and spring passage and mid-July to October for autumn passage.

VP surveys should be undertaken weekly in the autumn and spring passage periods and twice weekly during peak passage movement.

VP watches should be limited to 2 hours duration and be undertaken at dawn and dusk but also at night, preferably using specialist night vision or other supporting technologies.

Further VP survey effort will be required when key species are present, particularly raptors with the minimum effort suggested as 72 hours per season.

The survey area may include an area up to 2km from the proposed development site.

The guidance suggests that disturbance by the surveyor is a factor to be considered and that the observation position should be 500m from the turbine area. Disturbance is considered to be less significant if the surveyor is working from inside a car.

Breeding Birds Survey

Breeding birds survey should be undertaken at least once every two weeks from March to July.

Mortality Searches

A route around the site which includes all proposed turbine locations should be walked and bird mortality searches undertaken at times prior to the commencement of construction.

Reference/control site

The guidance recommends simultaneous survey of a reference or control site. This site must be as similar as possible to the wind farm area in terms of habitat, topography, size and suite of bird species. It must be close to the wind farm but not affected by it and should be outside the development buffer area. The guidance recognizes that it may be difficult to find a reference area that meets these conditions or obtain the necessary access permission.

Post construction monitoring

It appears that post-construction monitoring of the site and reference area will be required for 5 to 15 years after the completion of works. Survey work would be undertaken in years 1, 2, 3, 5, 10 and 15 and include both VP and mortality search surveys.

Capacity of surveyors

The guidance suggests that all surveyors should be suitably trained to undertake this work. Baker Consultants welcomes this advice, we have specialist ornithologists on staff with many years experience in wind farm work and will be interested to see what forms of training or accreditation will become available, indeed we hope to be able to take a lead in delivery. Ecological Consultancies will also be required to demonstrate that calibration exercises have been undertaken with all observers to ensure that distance and height observations are accurate.

Going forward from this point

As this guidance is new and has not been tested we cannot, at this point, be sure of how it will be interpreted by Natural England officers and planning authorities. Baker Consultants will be working with the Institute of Ecologists and Environmental Managers and other professional bodies to develop a coherent industry response and it is likely that we will be updating this response document as this work unfolds. There are a number of issues to which we will be seeking urgent clarification, in particular:

- The scope of survey required on sites which are neither “very small” or >5 turbines/5MW capacity.
- The potential disturbance effect of surveyors. As the majority of proposed wind farm sites encountered are on farmland, landfill, quarry, commercial forestry or semi-urban sites, where disturbance is a normal daily occurrence, we feel that the significance of this may have been overstated.
- The need for a reference/control sites. Our concerns include the potential for this to be a prohibitively expensive cost, the difficulty in locating and accessing such sites and the scientific value of such an approach. By this, we mean that if the control site is developed or significantly changes (for example through change of agricultural production) or that significant changes in avian ecology occur over a wide area which includes both the wind farm and reference area then results will become invalid. We will suggest that reference to baseline data would be better achieved through a desk based analysis of county bird records (or similar) over the period.
- Budgeting or quoting for work and timing of work past pre-survey assessment/consultation phase will be imprecise and subject to wide variability.

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