

Date: 16 February 2023



Hornbeam House
Crewe Business Park
Electra Way
Crewe
Cheshire
CW1 6GJ

T 0300 060 3900

Dear Local Authority,

We are writing to inform you of updated guidance regarding how we assess the ecological impacts of certain planning applications within, and in close proximity to, the Breckland Special Protection Area (SPA).

The Breckland SPA is classified for birds including stone curlew. Research has demonstrated that stone curlew nest in lower density close to residential buildings. We do not know which aspects of urbanisation are responsible for this reduced density because it is not feasible to isolate and experimentally manipulate different aspects (e.g. noise, light pollution, visual disturbance, recreational disturbance). It is understood that effects persist up to 2km and it is not just a line-of-sight disturbance issue at nests, as density is reduced even where intervening landscape features provide a visual buffer to housing.

To address this a 1.5km buffer zone around the SPA has been developed and adopted by all local authorities which denotes an impact risk zone where development may significantly impact stone curlew nest density.

Currently Natural England's advice has been that for residential developments where we have been able to rule out an adverse effect on the integrity of the SPA alone, we cannot rule out impacts from developments in-combination (currently planned developments) and cumulatively (the cumulative increase of residential development in a given area over time). We have developed a list of developments which are likely to fall below the threshold for impact within a Habitats Regulation Assessment (HRA) (Annex A)

These types of development will fall into one of two categories:

- 1) Developments where there is not likely to be a significant effect and can be screen out at stage one of an HRA.
- 2) Developments where there is likely to be a significant effect however the scale, placement or nature of the development mean that it falls below the threshold to act in-combination in

regard to the increased residential development impact pathway. These developments will need a simple generic appropriate assessment as would be completed for any other project that potentially impacts a European site.

For developments on this list, Natural England will advise that we have no objection and therefore should allow your authority to consider a small number of applications for minor developments.

This advice has been developed using the evidence from the stone curlew planning tool, a model developed by Footprint Ecology which predicts the number of nests lost as a result of new built development in addition to the available scientific literature. A technical note outlining the basis of this advice can be found in Annex B.

It is important to reiterate that this advice relates to the potential for projects to act in-combination via residential development only. Therefore, any applications that are taken forward to appropriate assessment should still consider impacts from construction and operation as they would normally.

We are continuing to use evidence to refine our advice on ecological impacts to Stone Curlew associated with the Breckland SPA and we will continue to provide updates on our work as it progresses. The potential for ongoing cumulative impacts will be monitored and our evidence base continually updated to ensure our advice remains pertinent. Natural England believes that there is still further work to be undertaken by local planning authorities in relation to stone curlew to address sustainable development more widely and is committed to supporting this work where appropriate.

Yours faithfully,

Norfolk & Suffolk Sustainable Development Team