



Elmsett Neighbourhood Plan Review

Updated Habitats Regulations Assessment Screening Report

Babergh & Mid Suffolk District Councils

Final report

Prepared by LUC

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Chapter 1

Introduction

1.1 LUC was commissioned by Babergh and Mid Suffolk District Councils (the Councils) in May 2024 to carry out Habitats Regulations Assessment (HRA) Screening of the Elmsett Neighbourhood Plan Review consultation document (March 2024). This Review has been prepared by Elmsett Parish Council, and in accordance with the requirements of the Neighbourhood Planning Regulations. The original HRA Screening report, published in May 2024, considered only those parts of the Neighbourhood Plan that were being updated; those being a revised Spatial Strategy policy and parts of supporting text in two of the ten chapters. Subsequent correspondence with the Examiner clarified that where a Neighbourhood Plan Review amends only certain policies, the entire neighbourhood plan as proposed to be revised should be subject to HRA Screening. Accordingly, the May 2024 HRA Screening Report has now been updated to take into account the whole Neighbourhood Plan Review, including those elements that remain unchanged from the originally made Plan (December 2019). That made Plan had been subject to its own HRA Screening (Place Services, 2019) and that work has been referred back to where relevant, in relation to those elements of the Neighbourhood Plan which are not subject to review.

The requirement to undertake Habitats Regulations Assessment of development plans

1.2 The requirement to undertake HRA of development plans was confirmed by the amendments to the Habitats Regulations published for England and Wales in 2007 [See reference 1]; the currently applicable version is the Habitats Regulations 2017 [See reference 2], as amended. Neighbourhood Plans, once made, become part of the statutory development plan therefore an HRA is

required by law to be carried out by the ‘competent authority’ (the Councils). The Councils can commission consultants to undertake HRA work on their behalf and this (the work documented in this report) is then reported to and considered by the Councils as the ‘competent authority’. The Councils will consider this work and would usually only progress a Plan if it considers that the Plan will not adversely affect the integrity [\[See reference 3\]](#) of any ‘European site’, as defined below (the exception to this would be where ‘imperative reasons of overriding public interest’ can be demonstrated; see paragraph 1.14). The requirement for authorities to comply with the Habitats Regulations when preparing a Plan is also noted in the Government’s online Planning Practice Guidance (PPG) [\[See reference 4\]](#).

1.3 HRA refers to the assessment of the potential effects of a development plan on one or more sites afforded the highest level of protection in the UK: Special Protection Areas (SPAs) and Special Areas of Conservation (SACs). These were classified under European Union (EU) legislation but, since 1 January 2021, are protected in the UK by the Habitats Regulations 2017 (as amended). Although the EU Directives from which the UK’s Habitats Regulations originally derived are no longer binding, the Regulations still make reference to the lists of habitats and species that the sites were designated for, which are listed in annexes to the EU Directives:

- SACs are designated for particular habitat types (specified in Annex 1 of the EU Habitats Directive [\[See reference 5\]](#)) and species (Annex II). The listed habitat types and species (excluding birds) are those considered to be most in need of conservation at a European level. Before EU exit day, designation of SACs also had regard to the coherence of the ‘Natura 2000’ network of European sites. After EU exit day, regard is had to the importance of such sites for the coherence of the UK’s ‘national site network’.
- SPAs are classified for rare and vulnerable birds (Annex I of the EU Birds Directive [\[See reference 6\]](#)), and for regularly occurring migratory species not listed in Annex I.

1.4 The term ‘European sites’ has been commonly used in HRA to refer to ‘Natura 2000’ sites [\[See reference 7\]](#) and Ramsar sites (international

designated under the Ramsar Convention). However, a Government Policy Paper [\[See reference 8\]](#) on changes to the Habitats Regulations 2017 post-Brexit states that:

- Any references to Natura 2000 in the 2017 Regulations and in guidance now refers to the new 'national site network';
- The national site network includes existing SACs and SPAs; and new SACs and SPAs designated under these Regulations; and
- Designated Wetlands of International Importance (known as Ramsar sites) do not form part of the national site network. Many Ramsar sites overlap with SACs and SPAs and may be designated for the same or different species and habitats.

1.5 Although Ramsar sites do not form part of the new national site network, Government guidance [\[See reference 9\]](#) states that:

"Any proposals affecting the following sites would also require an HRA because these are protected by government policy:

- Proposed SACs
- Potential SPAs
- Ramsar sites – wetlands of international importance (both listed and proposed)
- Areas secured as sites compensating for damage to a European site."

1.6 Furthermore, the NPPF [\[See reference 10\]](#) and practice guidance [\[See reference 11\]](#) currently state that competent authorities responsible for carrying out HRA should treat Ramsar sites in the same way as SACs and SPAs. The legislative requirement for HRA does not apply to other nationally designated wildlife sites such as Sites of Special Scientific Interest or National Nature Reserves.

1.7 For simplicity, this report uses the term ‘European site’ to refer to all types of designated site for which Government guidance [\[See reference 12\]](#) requires an HRA.

1.8 The overall purpose of an HRA is to conclude whether or not a proposal or policy, or whole development plan would adversely affect the integrity of the European site in question. This is judged in terms of the implications of the plan for a site’s ‘qualifying features’ (i.e. those Annex I habitats, Annex II species, and Annex I bird populations for which it has been designated). Significantly, HRA is based on the precautionary principle. Where uncertainty or doubt remains, an adverse effect should be assumed.

Stages of Habitat Regulation Assessment

1.9 The HRA of development plans is undertaken in stages (as described below) and should conclude whether or not a proposal would adversely affect the integrity of the European site in question.

1.10 LUC has been commissioned by Babergh and Mid Suffolk District Councils to carry out HRA work on the Councils’ behalf, and the outputs will be reported to and considered by the Councils as the competent authority.

1.11 The HRA also requires close working with Natural England as the statutory nature conservation body [\[See reference 13\]](#) in order to obtain the necessary information, agree the process, outcomes and mitigation proposals. The Environment Agency, while not a statutory consultee for the HRA, is also in a strong position to provide advice and information throughout the process as it is required to undertake HRA for its existing licences and future licensing of activities.

Requirements of the Habitats Regulations

1.12 In assessing the effects of a Plan in accordance with Regulation 105 of the Conservation of Habitats and Species Regulations 2017 (as amended) (the 'Habitats Regulations'), there are potentially two tests to be applied by the competent authority: a 'Significance Test', followed, if necessary, by an Appropriate Assessment which would inform the 'Integrity Test'. The relevant sequence of questions is as follows:

- Step 1: Under Reg. 105(1)(b), consider whether the plan is directly connected with or necessary to the management of the sites. If not, proceed to Step 2.
- Step 2: Under Reg. 105(1)(a) consider whether the plan is likely to have a significant effect on a European site, either alone or in combination with other plans or projects (the 'Significance Test'). [These two steps are undertaken as part of Stage 1: Screening, shown below in the 'Typical stages' section.] If yes, proceed to Step 3.
- Step 3: Under Reg. 105(1), make an Appropriate Assessment of the implications for the European site in view of its current conservation objectives (the 'Integrity Test'). In so doing, it is mandatory under Reg. 105(2) to consult Natural England, and optional under Reg. 105(3) to take the opinion of the general public. [This step is undertaken during Stage 2: Appropriate Assessment, described in the 'Typical stages' section below.]
- Step 4: In accordance with Reg. 105(4), but subject to Reg. 107, give effect to the land use plan only after having ascertained that the plan would not adversely affect the integrity of a European site. [This step follows Stage 2 where a finding of 'no adverse effect' is concluded. If it cannot be it proceeds to Step 5 as part of Stage 3 of the HRA process.]
- Step 5: Under Reg. 107, if Step 4 is unable to rule out adverse effects on the integrity of a European site and no alternative solutions exist then the competent authority may nevertheless agree to the plan or project if it must be carried out for 'imperative reasons of overriding public interest'

(IROPI). [This step is undertaken during Stage 3: Assessment where no alternatives exist and adverse impacts remain considering mitigation, described in the 'Typical stages' section overleaf.]

Typical stages

1.13 The section below summarises the stages and associated tasks and outcomes typically involved in carrying out a full HRA of a development plan, based on various guidance documents [\[See reference 14\]](#) [\[See reference 15\]](#) [\[See reference 16\]](#). This report presents the methodology and findings of Stage 1: Screening.

Stage 1: Screening (the 'Significance Test')

Tasks

- Description of the development plan and confirmation that it is not directly connected with or necessary to the management of European sites.
- Identification of potentially affected European sites and their conservation objectives [\[See reference 17\]](#).
- Assessment of likely significant effects of the development plan alone or in combination with other plans and projects, prior to consideration of avoidance or reduction ('mitigation') measures [\[See reference 18\]](#).

Outcome

- Where effects are unlikely, prepare a 'finding of no significant effect report'.
- Where effects judged likely, or lack of information to prove otherwise, proceed to Stage 2.

Stage 2: Appropriate Assessment (the ‘Integrity Test’)

Task

- Information gathering (development plan and data on European sites [\[See reference 19\]](#)).
- Impact prediction.
- Evaluation of development plan impacts in view of conservation objectives of European sites.
- Where impacts are considered to directly or indirectly affect qualifying features of European sites, identify how these effects will be avoided or reduced (‘mitigation’).

Outcome

- Appropriate Assessment report describing the plan, European site baseline conditions, the adverse effects of the plan on the European site, how these effects will be avoided or reduced, including the mechanisms and timescale for these mitigation measures.
- If effects remain after all alternatives and mitigation measures have been considered proceed to Stage 3.

Stage 3: Assessment where no alternatives exist and adverse impacts remain taking into account mitigation

Task

- Identify 'imperative reasons of overriding public interest' (IROPI).
- Demonstrate no alternatives exist.
- Identify potential compensatory measures.

Outcome

- This stage should be avoided if at all possible. The test of IROPI and the requirements for compensation are extremely onerous.

1.14 It is normally anticipated that an emphasis on Stages 1 and 2 of this process will, through a series of iterations, help ensure that potential adverse effects are identified and eliminated through the inclusion of mitigation measures designed to avoid or reduce effects. The need to consider alternatives could imply more onerous changes to a plan document. It is generally understood that so called 'imperative reasons of overriding public interest' (IROPI) are likely to be justified only very occasionally and would involve engagement with the Government.

Relevant case law

1.15 This HRA has been prepared in accordance with relevant case law findings, including most notably the 'People over Wind' and 'Holohan' rulings from the Court of Justice for the European Union (CJEU).

1.16 The People over Wind, Peter Sweetman v Coillte Teoranta (April 2018) judgment ruled that Article 6(3) of the Habitats Directive should be interpreted as meaning that mitigation measures should be assessed as part of an Appropriate Assessment and should not be taken into account at the Screening stage. The precise wording of the ruling is as follows:

“Article 6(3)... must be interpreted as meaning that, in order to determine whether it is necessary to carry out, subsequently, an appropriate assessment of the implications, for a site concerned, of a plan or project, it is not appropriate, at the Screening stage, to take account of measures intended to avoid or reduce the harmful effects of the plan or project on that site.”

1.17 In light of the above, the HRA Screening stage does not rely upon avoidance or mitigation measures to draw conclusions as to whether the Neighbourhood Plan Review could result in likely significant effects on European sites, with any such measures are to be considered at the Appropriate Assessment stage as relevant.

1.18 This HRA also fully considers the Holohan v An Bord Pleanala (November 2018) judgment which stated that:

“Article 6(3) of Council Directive 92/43/EEC of 21 May 1992 on the conservation of natural habitats and of wild fauna and flora must be interpreted as meaning that an ‘appropriate assessment’ must, on the one hand, catalogue the entirety of habitat types and species for which a site is protected, and, on the other, identify and examine both the implications of the proposed project for the species present on that site, and for which that site has not been listed, and the implications for habitat types and species to be found outside the boundaries of that site, provided that those implications are liable to affect the conservation objectives of the site.”

1.19 In undertaking this HRA, LUC has fully considered the potential effects on species and habitats, including those not listed as qualifying features, to result in secondary effects upon the qualifying features of European sites, including the potential for complex interactions and dependencies. In addition, the potential for offsite impacts, such as through impacts to functionally linked land, and/or species and habitats located beyond the boundaries of European site, but which may be important in supporting the ecological processes of the qualifying features, has also been fully considered in this HRA.

1.20 Similarly, effects on both qualifying and supporting habitats and species on functionally linked land (FLL) or habitat have been considered in the HRA, in line with the High Court judgment in *RSPB and others v Secretary of State and London Ashford Airport Ltd* [2014 EWHC 1523 Admin] (paragraph 27), which stated that:

“There is no authority on the significance of the non-statutory status of the FLL. However, the fact that the FLL was not within a protected site does not mean that the effect which a deterioration in its quality or function could have on a protected site is to be ignored. The indirect effect was still protected. Although the question of its legal status was mooted, I am satisfied... that while no particular legal status attaches to FLL, the fact that land is functionally linked to protected land means that the indirectly adverse effects on a protected site, produced by effects on FLL, are scrutinised in the same legal framework just as are the direct effects of acts carried out on the protected site itself. That is the only sensible and purposive approach where a species or effect is not confined by a line on a map or boundary fence. This is particularly important where the boundaries of designated sites are drawn tightly as may be the UK practice.”

1.21 In addition to this, the HRA takes into consideration the ‘Wealden’ judgment from the Court of Justice for the European Union.

1.22 Wealden District Council v Secretary of State for Communities and Local Government, Lewes District Council and South Downs National Park Authority (2017) ruled that it was not appropriate to scope out the need for a detailed assessment for an individual plan or project based on the annual average daily traffic (AADT) figures detailed in the Design Manual for Roads and Bridges or the critical loads used by Defra or Environmental Agency without considering the in-combination impacts with other plans and projects.

1.23 In light of this judgment, the HRA therefore considers traffic growth based on the effects of development from the Neighbourhood Plan Review in combination with other drivers of growth such as development proposed in neighbouring districts and demographic change.

1.24 The HRA also takes into account the Grace and Sweetman (July 2018) judgment from the CJEU which stated that:

“There is a distinction to be drawn between protective measures forming part of a project and intended avoid or reduce any direct adverse effects that may be caused by the project in order to ensure that the project does not adversely affect the integrity of the area, which are covered by Article 6(3), and measures which, in accordance with Article 6(4), are aimed at compensating for the negative effects of the project on a protected area and cannot be taken into account in the assessment of the implications of the project”

“As a general rule, any positive effects of the future creation of a new habitat, which is aimed at compensating for the loss of area and quality of that habitat type in a protected area, are highly difficult to forecast with any degree of certainty or will be visible only in the future”

“A mitigation strategy may only be taken into account at AA (a.6(3)) where the competent authority is “sufficiently certain that a measure will make an

effective contribution to avoiding harm, guaranteeing beyond all reasonable doubt that the project will not adversely affect the integrity of the area”

“Otherwise it falls to be considered to be a compensatory measure to be considered under a.6(4) only where there are “imperative reasons of overriding public interest”

1.25 Therefore, if an Appropriate Assessment of the Neighbourhood Plan Review is required, it will only consider the existence of measures to avoid or reduce its direct adverse effects (mitigation) if the expected benefits of those measures are beyond reasonable doubt at the time of the assessment.

Structure of this report

1.26 This chapter (Chapter 1) has described the background to the production of the Elmsett Neighbourhood Plan Review and the requirement to undertake HRA. The remainder of the report is structured as follows:

- Chapter 2: Elmsett Neighbourhood Plan Review summarises the content of the Plan Review, which is the subject of this report.
- Chapter 3: Method sets out the approach used, and the specific tasks undertaken during the Screening stage of the HRA.
- Chapter 4: Screening Assessment describes the findings of the Screening stage of the HRA.
- Chapter 5: Conclusions and Next Steps summarises the HRA conclusions for the Elmsett Neighbourhood Plan Review and describes the next steps to be undertaken.

Chapter 2

Elmsett Neighbourhood Plan Review

2.1 The existing Elmsett Neighbourhood Plan was adopted ('made') by Babergh District council in 2019. Elmsett Parish Council is now in the process of reviewing the 2019 Neighbourhood Plan to bring it in line with the new policies for the location of development across Babergh, as set out in the adopted Part 1 Joint Local Plan for Babergh and Mid Suffolk. The scope of the Neighbourhood Plan Review is limited and therefore the original version of this HRA Screening Report related to those parts of the Plan only (although in-combination effects were taken into account as appropriate in line with the Habitats Regulations). Since then, correspondence with the Examiner for the Neighbourhood Plan Review has clarified that in the event of a Neighbourhood Plan being subject to review which involves amending only some policies, the whole NDP as proposed to be reviewed should be subject to HRA Screening. Therefore, the May 2024 HRA Screening Report has now been updated to take into account the whole plan, including those elements that are not subject to change.

2.2 The existing Neighbourhood Plan sets out 16 planning policies (EMST1-16) which set out the approach to development in Elmsett. Policy EMST1: Spatial Strategy is subject to review. The revised policy EMST1 states that the Neighbourhood Area will accommodate development commensurate with the policies of the adopted Babergh and Mid Suffolk Joint Local Plan – Part 1.

2.3 The Neighbourhood Plan 2019 allocated one site for development in Policy EMST3 – Land at Hadleigh Road. The site was allocated for approximately 41 dwellings and has since been granted planning permission and built out. This policy has therefore been deleted from the Review Plan and the subsequent policies are renumbered accordingly. The Neighbourhood Plan Review does not therefore allocate any sites for development.

Chapter 3

Methodology

Screening Assessment

3.1 HRA Screening of the Elmsett Neighbourhood Plan Review has been undertaken in line with current available guidance and has sought to meet the requirements of the Habitats Regulations. The tasks that have been undertaken during the Screening stage of the HRA and the conclusions reached are described in detail below.

3.2 The purpose of the Screening stage is to:

- Identify all aspects of the plan that would have no effect on a European site. These can be eliminated from further consideration in respect of this and other plans.
- Identify all aspects of the plan that would not be likely to have a significant effect on a European site (i.e. would have some effect because of links/connectivity but the effect is not significant), either alone or in combination with other aspects of the same plan or other plans or projects. These do not require 'Appropriate Assessment'.
- Identify those aspects of the plan where it is not possible to rule out the risk of significant effects on a European site, either alone or in combination with other plans or projects. This provides a clear scope for the parts of the plan that will require Appropriate Assessment.

Identifying European sites that may be affected and their conservation objectives

3.3 As a first step in identifying European sites that could potentially be affected by a development, it is established practice in HRA to consider sites within the area covered by the plan, and other sites that may be affected beyond this area.

3.4 A distance of 20km from the boundary of the plan area was used in the first instance to identify European sites with the potential to be affected by the proposals within the Neighbourhood Plan Review. Consideration was then given to whether any more distant European sites may be connected to the plan area via effects pathways, for example through hydrological links or recreational visits by residents. The 20km distance has been agreed with Natural England for HRAs in this region [See reference 20]. In line with HRA requirements, the application of a 20km buffer is considered a highly precautionary distance with relation to potential impacts to the surrounding area.

3.5 The assessment also considers areas that may be functionally linked to the European sites. The term ‘functional linkage’ is used to refer to the role or ‘function’ that land beyond the boundary of a European site might fulfil in terms of supporting the species populations for which the site was designated or classified. Such an area is therefore ‘linked’ to the site in question because it provides a (potentially important) role in maintaining or restoring a protected population at favourable conservation status.

3.6 While the boundary of a European site will usually be drawn to include key supporting habitat for a qualifying species, this cannot always be the case where the population for which a site is designated or classified is particularly mobile. Individuals of the population will not necessarily remain in the site all the time. Sometimes, the mobility of qualifying species is considerable and may extend so far from the key habitat that forms the SAC or SPA that it would be entirely impractical to attempt to designate or classify all of the land or sea that may conceivably be used by the species [See reference 21]. HRA therefore

considers whether any European sites make use of functionally linked habitats, and the impacts that could affect those habitats.

3.7 European sites identified for inclusion in the HRA on the basis of being within 20km of Elmsett Parish are listed below in Table 3.1 and their locations are illustrated in Figure A.1 in Appendix A. Detailed information about each European site is provided in Appendix B, described with reference to Standard Data Forms for the SPAs, and Natural England's Site Improvement Plans [\[See reference 22\]](#). Natural England's conservation objectives [\[See reference 23\]](#) for the SPAs have also been reviewed. These state that site integrity must be maintained or restored by maintaining or restoring the habitats of qualifying features, the supporting processes on which they rely, and populations of qualifying species.

Table 3.1: European Sites within 20km of Elmsett Neighbourhood Plan Area

European Sites	Closest Distance/Location from Neighbourhood Plan Area
Stour and Orwell Estuaries SPA and Ramsar site	11km south-east
Deben Estuary SPA and Ramsar site	19km east

Assessment of 'likely significant effects' of the plan

3.8 As required under Regulation 105 of the Conservation of Habitats and Species Regulations 2017 [\[See reference 24\]](#) (as amended), an assessment has been undertaken of the 'likely significant effects' of the Neighbourhood Plan Review. The assessment has been prepared in order to identify which policies or site allocations would be likely to have a significant effect on European sites.

The Screening assessment has been conducted without taking mitigation into account, in accordance with the 'People over Wind' judgment.

3.9 If the potential for policies to have likely significant effects is identified, consideration would then be given to the potential for the development proposed to result in significant effects associated with:

- Physical loss or damage to habitat;
- Non-physical disturbance (noise, vibration and light pollution);
- Non-toxic contamination;
- Air pollution;
- Recreational pressure; and
- Changes to hydrology, including water quantity and quality.

3.10 This thematic/impact category approach also allows for consideration to be given to the cumulative effects of policies and any site allocations, rather than focussing exclusively on individual developments provided for by the plan.

3.11 For some types of impacts, the potential for likely significant effects can be determined on a proximity basis. This approach and the assumptions applied are described in more detail in Chapter 4.

3.12 A Screening assessment was undertaken (Chapter 4), to document consideration of the potential for likely significant effects resulting from the Neighbourhood Plan Review. A risk-based approach involving the application of the precautionary principle was adopted in the assessment, such that a conclusion of 'no significant effect' would only be reached where it was considered unlikely, based on current knowledge and the information available, that a development plan policy or site allocation would have a significant effect on the integrity of a European site.

Interpretation of ‘likely significant effects’

3.13 Relevant case law helps to interpret when effects should be considered as a likely significant effect, when carrying out HRA of a land use plan.

3.14 In the Waddenzee case [See reference 25], the European Court of Justice ruled on the interpretation of Article 6(3) of the Habitats Directive (translated into Reg. 102 in the Habitats Regulations), including that:

An effect should be considered ‘likely’, “if it cannot be excluded, on the basis of objective information, that it will have a significant effect on the site” (paragraph 44). An effect should be considered ‘significant’, “if it undermines the conservation objectives” (paragraph 48). Where a plan or project has an effect on a site “but is not likely to undermine its conservation objectives, it cannot be considered likely to have a significant effect on the site concerned” (paragraph 47).

3.15 A relevant opinion delivered to the Court of Justice of the European Union commented that:

“The requirement that an effect in question be ‘significant’ exists in order to lay down a de minimis threshold. Plans or projects that have no appreciable effect on the site are thereby excluded. If all plans or projects capable of having any effect whatsoever on the site were to be caught by Article 6(3), activities on or near the site would risk being impossible by reason of legislative overkill.”

3.16 This opinion (the ‘Sweetman’ case) therefore allows for the authorisation of plans and projects whose possible effects, alone or in combination, can be considered ‘trivial’ or de minimis; referring to such cases as those “that have no appreciable effect on the site”. In practice such effects could be screened out as having no likely significant effect – they would be ‘insignificant’.

3.17 The HRA Screening assessment therefore considers whether the Elmsett Neighbourhood Plan Review could have likely significant effects either alone or in combination.

Mitigation provided by the plan

3.18 Some of the potential effects of a plan could be mitigated through the implementation of other policies in the plan itself, such as the provision of green infrastructure within new developments (which could help mitigate increased pressure from recreation activities at European sites). Nevertheless, in accordance with the ‘People over Wind’ judgment, avoidance and mitigation measures cannot be relied upon at the Screening stage, and therefore, where such measures exist, they will be considered at the Appropriate Assessment stage for impacts and policies where likely significant effects, either alone or in combination, cannot be ruled out.

Assessment of potential in-combination effects

3.19 Regulation 105 of the Habitats Regulations 2017 requires an Appropriate Assessment where “a land use plan is likely to have a significant effect on a European site (either alone or in combination with other plans or projects) and is not directly connected with or necessary to the management of the site”. Therefore, where likely insignificant effects are identified for the plan alone, it is necessary to consider whether these may become significant effects in combination with other plans or projects.

3.20 Where the plan is likely to have an effect on its own (due to impact pathways being present), but it is not likely to be significant, the in-combination assessment at Screening stage needs to determine whether there may also be the same types of effect from other plans or projects that could combine with the plan to produce a significant effect. If so, this likely significant effect arising from the plan in combination with other plans or projects, would then need to be considered through the Appropriate Assessment stage to determine if the impact pathway would have an adverse effect on integrity of the relevant European site. Where the Screening assessment has concluded that there is no impact pathway between development proposed in the plan and the conditions necessary to maintain qualifying features of a European site, then there will be no in-combination effects to assess at the Screening or Appropriate Assessment stage. This approach accords with recent guidance on HRA [\[See reference 26\]](#).

3.21 If impact pathways are found to exist for a particular effect but it is not likely to be significant from the plan alone, the in-combination assessment will identify which other plans and programmes could result in the same impact on the same European site. This will focus on planned growth (including housing, employment, transport, minerals and waste) around the affected site, or along the impact corridor.

3.22 The potential for in-combination impacts will therefore focus on plans prepared by local authorities that overlap with European sites that are within the scope of this HRA. The findings of any associated HRA work for those plans will be reviewed where available. Where relevant, any strategic projects in the area that could have in-combination effects with the plan will also be identified and reviewed.

3.23 The online HRA Handbook [\[See reference 27\]](#) suggests the following plans and projects may be relevant to consider as part of the in-combination assessment:

- Applications lodged but not yet determined, including refusals subject to an outstanding appeal or legal challenge;

- Projects subject to periodic review e.g. annual licences, during the time that their renewal is under consideration;
- Projects authorised but not yet started;
- Projects started but not yet completed;
- Known projects that do not require external authorisation; and
- Proposals in adopted plans.

Chapter 4

Screening Assessment

4.1 As described in Chapter 3, a Screening assessment has been carried out in order to identify the likely significant effects of the Elmsett Neighbourhood Plan Review on the scoped-in European sites. The findings are summarised below, firstly by impact types and then by considering the policy covered by the Neighbourhood Plan Review.

Potential impact pathways

4.2 For some types of impacts, Screening for likely significant effects was determined on a proximity basis, using GIS data to determine the distance of potential development locations to the European sites that were the subject of the assessment. However, there are many uncertainties associated with using set distances as there are very few standards available as a guide to how far impacts will travel. Therefore, a number of assumptions were applied in relation to the potential impact pathways that may result from the plan, as described below.

Physical damage and loss (on-site)

4.3 Any development resulting from the Neighbourhood Plan Review would take place within Elmsett Parish; therefore only European sites within the parish could be affected through physical damage or loss of habitat from within the site boundaries. No European sites are located within the boundary of the parish and therefore no likely significant effect is predicted in relation to physical damage and loss (on-site).

Physical damage and loss (offsite)

4.4 Habitat loss from development in areas outside of the European site boundaries may result in likely significant effects where that habitat contributes towards maintaining the interest feature for which the European site is designated. This includes land which that may provide offsite movement corridors or foraging and sheltering habitat for mobile species such as birds, bats and fish. European sites susceptible to the indirect effects of habitat loss are restricted to those sites with qualifying species that rely on offsite habitat. This is the case for all four European sites within 20km of the Neighbourhood Plan Review area:

- Stour and Orwell Estuaries SPA and Ramsar site; and
- Deben Estuary SPA and Ramsar site.

4.5 Both Stour and Orwell Estuaries SPA and Deben Estuary SPA are designated for supporting qualifying bird species and as such these European sites are considered susceptible to impacts from development proposed outside the boundaries of the SPAs. For many species, the distance in which offsite functionally linked land occurs is c. 2km; however, for some bird species, including golden plover and lapwing, a greater distance may be appropriate. Lapwing is one of the qualifying species for Stour and Orwell Estuaries SPA, however as the Neighbourhood Plan area is 11km from the SPA it is assumed that at that distance the dependency on pasture land or arable land during the breeding season of the lapwing is likely to be negligible because such habitats are low in their ecological uniqueness and occur in abundance in both the wider region and in much closer proximity to the SPA.

4.6 Therefore, no likely significant effects will occur from the Neighbourhood Plan Review as a result of physical damage and loss to offsite habitat, either alone or in-combination with other plans and policies.

Non-physical disturbance (noise, vibration and light)

4.7 Noise and vibration effects are most likely to disturb bird species and thus are a key consideration with respect to potential effects on European sites where birds are the qualifying features. Artificial lighting at night has the potential to affect species where it occurs in close proximity to key habitat areas, such as key roosting sites of SPA birds.

4.8 It has been assumed that the effects of noise, vibration and light are most likely to be significant within a distance of 500 metres. There is also evidence of 300 metres being used as a distance up to which certain bird species can be disturbed by the effects of noise [See reference 28]; however, it has been assumed (on a precautionary basis) that the effects of noise, vibration and light pollution are capable of causing an adverse effect if development takes place within 500 metres of a European site with qualifying features sensitive to these types of disturbance.

4.9 All European sites are located over 500 metres from the Neighbourhood Plan Review area and therefore are not considered susceptible to impacts relating to onsite non-physical disturbance from development in the plan area. Offsite impacts can also be screened out, due to the distance of the SPAs from the Neighbourhood Plan Review area.

Non-toxic contamination (dust)

4.10 Non-toxic contamination can include the creation of dust which can smother habitats preventing natural processes and may also lead to effects associated with increased sediment and dust which can potentially affect the turbidity of aquatic habitats and can also contribute to nutrient enrichment which can lead to changes in the rate of vegetative succession and habitat composition.

4.11 The effects of non-toxic contamination are most likely to be significant if development takes place within 500 metres of a European site with qualifying features sensitive to these types of disturbance, such as riparian and wetland habitats, or sites designated for habitats and plant species. This is the distance that, in our experience, provides a robust assessment of effects in plan-level HRA and meets with the agreement of Natural England.

4.12 All European sites are located over 500 metres from the Neighbourhood Plan Review area and therefore are not considered susceptible to impacts relating to non-toxic contamination from development in the Plan area and are screened out of the assessment.

Air pollution

4.13 Air pollution is most likely to affect European sites where plant, soil and water habitats are the qualifying features, but some qualifying animal species may also be affected, either directly or indirectly, by deterioration in habitat as a result of air pollution. Deposition of pollutants to the ground and vegetation can alter the characteristics of the soil, affecting the pH and nitrogen levels, which can then affect plant health, productivity and species composition.

4.14 In terms of vehicle traffic, nitrogen oxides (NO_x, i.e. NO and NO₂) are considered to be the key pollutants. Deposition of nitrogen compounds may lead to both soil and freshwater acidification, and NO_x can cause eutrophication of soils and water.

4.15 Based on the Highways England Design Manual for Road and Bridges (DMRB) LA 105 Air quality (which sets out the requirements for assessing and reporting the effects of highway projects on air quality), it is assumed that air pollution from roads is unlikely to be significant beyond 200 metres from the road itself. Where increases in traffic volumes are forecast, this 200 metres buffer needs to be applied to the relevant roads in order to make a judgement about the likely geographical extent of air pollution impacts.

4.16 For highways within 200 metres of sensitive receptors, the DMRB provides the following Screening criteria to ascertain whether there are likely to be significant impacts from developments:

- Daily traffic flows will change by 1,000 AADT (Annual Average Daily Traffic) or more; or
- Heavy duty vehicle (HDV) flows will change by 200 AADT or more; or
- There will be a change in speed band; or
- Road carriageway alignment will change by 5 metres or more.

4.17 Thus, where significant increases in traffic are possible on roads within 200 metres of European sites, traffic forecast data may be needed to determine if increases in vehicle traffic are likely to be significant. In line with the Wealden judgment [\[See reference 29\]](#), the traffic growth considered by the HRA should be based on the effects of development provided for by the plan in combination with other drivers of growth such as development proposed in neighbouring districts and demographic change.

4.18 It has been assumed that only those roads forming part of the primary road network (motorways and 'A' roads) are likely to experience any significant increases in vehicle traffic as a result of development (i.e. greater than 1,000 AADT). As such, where a site is within 200 metres of only minor roads, no significant effect from traffic-related air pollution is considered to be the likely outcome.

4.19 Part of the A14 passes within 200 metres of the Stour and Orwell Estuaries SPA and Ramsar site; however there is no direct road link from Elmsett Parish to the A14. In any case, the Neighbourhood Plan Review does not allocate any sites for development, which could result in traffic generation (see next section). Therefore, no European sites are considered to be susceptible to impacts from air pollution caused by the Elmsett Neighbourhood Plan Review.

Recreation

4.20 Recreational activities and human presence can result in significant effects on European sites. European sites with qualifying bird species are likely to be particularly susceptible to recreational disturbances from walking, dog walking, angling, illegal use of off-road vehicles and motorbikes, wildfowling, and water sports. In addition, recreation can physically damage habitat as a result of trampling, fire or vandalism and also through erosion associated with terrestrial activities.

4.21 Each European site will typically have a 'Zone of Influence' (ZOI) within which increases in population would be expected to result in likely significant effects. ZOIs are usually established following targeted visitor surveys and the findings are therefore typically specific to each European site (and often to specific areas within a European site). The findings are likely to be influenced by a number of complex and interacting factors and therefore it is not always appropriate to apply a generic or non-specific ZOI to a European Site.

4.22 Existing visitor survey work available for European sites is summarised in Table 4.1 below:

Table 4.1: Zone of Influence (ZOI) derived from existing visitor survey work

European Site	ZOI
Stour and Orwell Estuaries SPA and Ramsar site	13km
Deben Estuary SPA and Ramsar site	13km

4.23 A review of the European sites and their recreational ZOIs set out in Table 4.1 determined that the following European sites do not have a recreational ZOI

that extends into the Neighbourhood Plan area and can therefore be scoped out of further assessment:

- Deben Estuary SPA and Ramsar site.

4.24 Likely significant effect as a result of recreation cannot be ruled out at this stage for the remaining European site (Stour and Orwell Estuaries SPA and Ramsar site) due to a lack of impact pathway, as the ZOI extends slightly into the Neighbourhood Plan area (Elmsett Parish is located around 11km from the SPA and Ramsar site).

Reduced water quantity and quality

4.25 An increase in demand for water abstraction and treatment resulting from any growth proposed in the Neighbourhood Plan Review could result in changes in hydrology at European sites. Depending on the qualifying features and particular vulnerabilities of the European sites, this could result in likely significant effects, for example, due to changes in environmental or biotic conditions, water chemistry and the extent and distribution of preferred habitat conditions.

4.26 All scoped-in European sites have been identified to support habitats and/or qualifying species, which are susceptible to impacts from changes in water quantity and quality. Therefore, likely significant effects as a result of reduced water quantity and quality cannot be ruled out on the basis of there being no impact pathway.

HRA Screening of policies

4.27 The original version of this Screening Report (May 2024) considered only the policy that was proposed to be revised, EMST1. In line with advice from the Neighbourhood Plan Review Examiner, the Screening assessment has now

been updated to screen each of the policies in the Neighbourhood Plan Review, also reflecting the deletion of policy EMST3 and the subsequent renumbering.

Policy EMST1 – Spatial Strategy

Potential likely significant effects

4.28 None – This policy sets out how the Neighbourhood Area will accommodate development commensurate with the adopted Babergh and Mid Suffolk Joint Local Plan – Part 1. It also outlines that the focus for new development will be within the defined settlement boundary where the principle of development is accepted. The policy also states that proposals for development located outside the settlement boundary will only be permitted where they are in accordance with national, district and neighbourhood level policies and where they would not have a detrimental impact on infrastructure capacity or heritage and landscape designations. This policy will not directly result in development.

Policy EMST2 – Housing Development

Potential likely significant effects

4.29 None – This policy sets out that housing growth within the Neighbourhood Plan Area will be met through the allocation of sites within the Plan (noting that the site previously allocated has now been built out and that policy removed from the Neighbourhood Plan Review), small brownfield windfall sites and infill plots which are not identified in the Plan. As the only site allocation in the Neighbourhood Plan is to be deleted in the Neighbourhood Plan Review, the Review Plan will not result directly in new development.

Policy EMST3 – Affordable Housing on Rural Exception Sites

Potential likely significant effects

4.30 None – This policy sets out requirements for proposals for the development of small-scale affordable housing schemes on rural exception sites outside the main village built up area boundary, where housing would not normally be permitted by other policies. This policy will not directly result in development.

Policy EMST4 – Housing Space Standards

Potential likely significant effects

4.31 None – This policy sets out space standards that will apply to new dwellings, and requires dwellings to make adequate provision for the covered storage of bins and cycles. It will not result directly in development.

Policy EMST5 – Housing Mix

Potential likely significant effects

4.32 None – This policy requires housing developments to contribute to meeting the needs of the Plan area by delivering an appropriate mix of housing sizes, with at least 47% of new developments of 10 or more homes being one or two bedroom dwellings unless certain criteria are met. The policy will not result directly in new development.

Policy EMST6 – Area of Local Landscape Sensitivity

Potential likely significant effects

4.33 None – The policy permits development proposals in the Area of Local Landscape Sensitivity only where they meet specified criteria. The policy will not result directly in development.

Policy EMST7 – Local Green Spaces

Potential likely significant effects

4.34 None – This policy identifies seven Local Green Spaces within the Neighbourhood Plan area. This policy will not result in development.

Policy EMST8 – Protection of Important Views and Landscape Character

Potential likely significant effects

4.35 None – This policy seeks to protect important views and requires proposed developments not to detract from the key landscape features of these views. The policy will not result in development.

Policy EMST9 – Elmsett Special Character Area

Potential likely significant effects

4.36 None – The policy identifies a Special Character Area within Elmsett and sets out that within the Special Character Area, as well as having regard to the need to preserve or enhance the significance of the heritage assets in or adjoining the area, consideration should be given as to how a proposal enhances the distinct characteristics of the identified area. This policy will not result in development.

Policy EMST10 – Heritage Assets

Potential likely significant effects

4.37 None – This policy requires development proposals to adhere to certain criteria in order to ensure the conservation and enhancement of Elmsett's heritage assets. The policy will not result in development.

Policy EMST11 – Development Design Considerations

Potential likely significant effects

4.38 None – This policy sets out requirements for the design of development in the Parish. This policy will not itself result in development.

Policy EMST12 – Communications Technology

Potential likely significant effects

4.39 None – This policy supports proposals from mobile phone network operators to improve mobile coverage, where certain criteria are met. While this could in theory result in the development of associated infrastructure, this would be small in scale and is not expected to have likely significant effects on European sites.

Policy EMST13 – Employment Sites

Potential likely significant effects

4.40 None – This policy supports the retention and intensification of employment uses at Elmsett Airfield and at Gate Farm, subject to certain criteria. It will not result in new employment development.

Policy EMST14 – Community Facilities and Services

Potential likely significant effects

4.41 None – This policy permits the provision and enhancement of community services and facilities where they contribute to the quality of the village and improve its sustainability. Any such developments would be small in scale and within the built up area of the village and are not expected to have likely significant effects on European sites.

Policy EMST15 – Open Space, Sport and Recreation Facilities

Potential likely significant effects

4.42 None – This policy supports proposals for the provision, enhancement or expansion of amenity, sport or recreation open space or facilities, subject to compliance with other policies in the Development Plan. It also seeks to avoid the loss of existing facilities. Any such development would be small in scale and within the built up area of the village, and likely significant effects on European sites are therefore not expected.

HRA Screening Conclusions

4.43 Although the Screening assessment by impact concludes that there are some potential pathways of effects, no likely effects on European sites as a result of the Elmsett Neighbourhood Plan Review are expected and Appropriate Assessment is not required.

Chapter 5

Conclusions and Next Steps

5.1 No likely significant effects are predicted on European sites as a result of the Elmsett Neighbourhood Plan Review, either alone or in combination with other policies and proposals. This is because, although there are potential impact pathways from the Neighbourhood Plan Review area to European sites, the Neighbourhood Plan Review does not include policies that will result in new development.

5.2 An Appropriate Assessment is therefore not required for the Elmsett Neighbourhood Plan Review.

Next steps

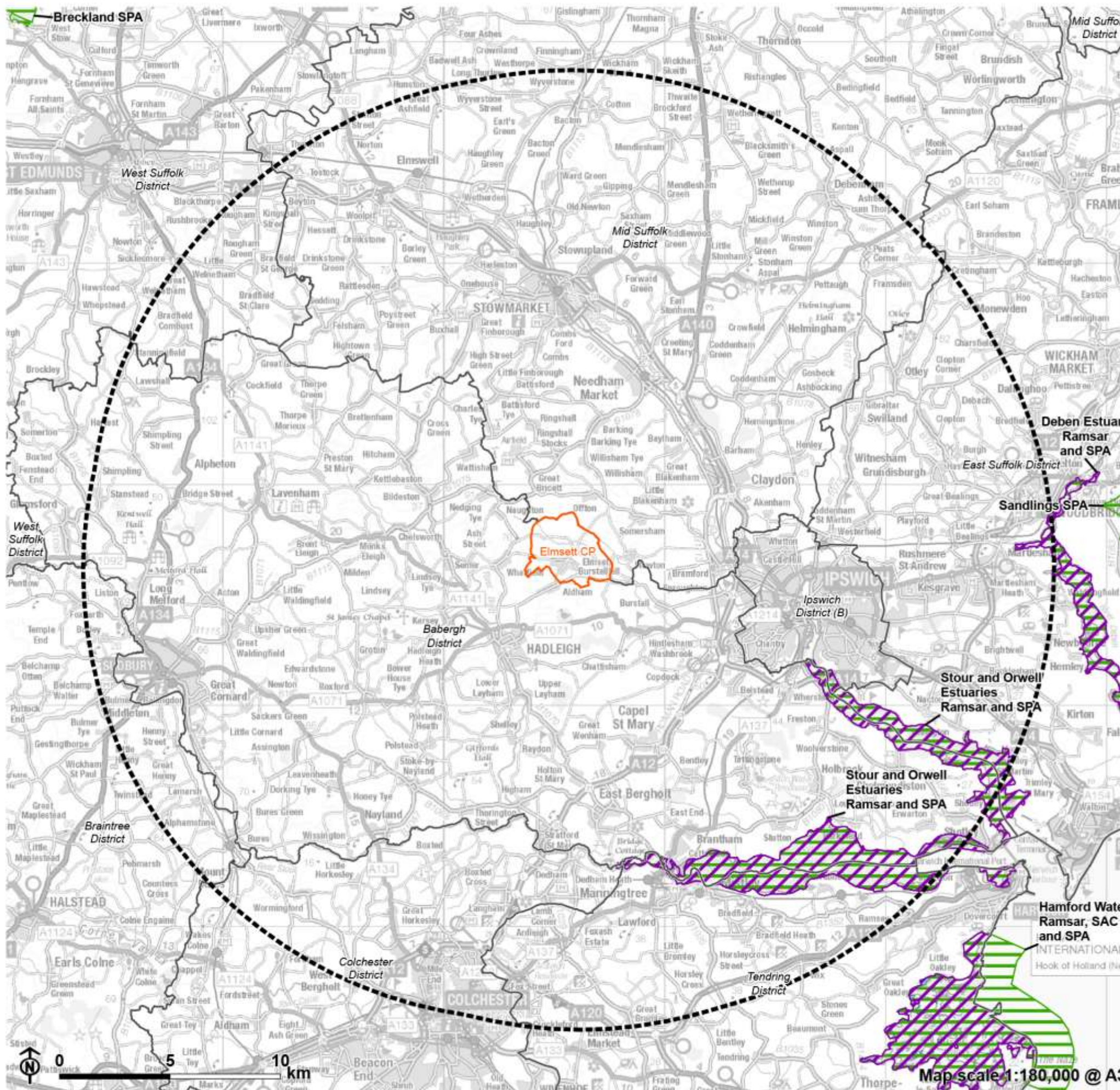
5.3 HRA is an iterative process and as such, this assessment should be updated if any relevant, newly available evidence or comments from key consultees are received prior to the plan being finalised. It is recommended that this report is subject to consultation with Natural England and the Environment Agency to confirm that the conclusions of the assessment are considered appropriate at this stage of plan-making.

LUC

July 2026

Appendix A

Map of European Sites within 20km of Elmsett Neighbourhood Plan Area



Habitat Regulations Assessment Screening for Babergh Mid Suffolk Neighbourhood



European Designated Sites within 20km of Elmsett Neighbourhood Plan Area

- Neighbourhood Plan area
- 20km buffer from Neighbourhood Plan area
- Local Authority boundary
- Ramsar
- SPA
- SAC

Appendix B

Attributes of European Sites

B.1 This appendix contains information on the European sites that have been scoped into the HRA. Site areas and designated features are drawn from SAC and SPA Standard Data Forms and Ramsar Site Information Sheets [See reference 30]. The overviews of sites and their locations are drawn from Natural England's Site Improvement Plans [See reference 31] Site conservation objectives are drawn from Natural England's website and are only available for SACs and SPAs [See reference 32].

Stour and Orwell Estuaries SPA

Overview of site and its location

B.2 The Stour and Orwell estuaries straddle the eastern part of the Essex/Suffolk border in eastern England. The estuaries include extensive mud-flats, low cliffs, saltmarsh and small areas of vegetated shingle on the lower reaches. The mud-flats hold *Enteromorpha*, *Zostera* and *Salicornia* spp. The site also includes an area of low-lying grazing marsh at Shotley Marshes on the south side of the Orwell. In summer, the site supports important numbers of breeding Avocet *Recurvirostra avosetta*, while in winter they hold major concentrations of waterbirds, especially geese, ducks and waders. The geese also feed, and waders roost, in surrounding areas of agricultural land outside the SPA.

B.3 The site has close ecological links with the Hamford Water and Mid-Essex Coast SPAs, lying to the south on the same coast.

Qualifying features

B.4 Annex I species:

- Over winter:
 - Hen Harrier *Circus cyaneus*

B.5 This site also qualifies under Article 4.2 of the Directive (79/409/EEC) by supporting populations of Habitats importance of the following migratory species:

- Over winter:
 - Black-tailed godwit *Limosa limosa islandica*
 - Dunlin *Calidris alpina alpina*
 - Grey plover *Pluvialis squatarola*
 - Pintail *Anas acuta*
 - Redshank *Tringa totanus*
 - Ringed plover *Charadrius hiaticula*
 - Shelduck *Tadorna tadorna*
 - Turnstone *Arenaria interpres*

B.6 The area qualifies under Article 4.2 of the Directive (79/409/EEC) by regularly supporting at least 20,000 waterfowl including:

- Cormorant *Phalacrocorax carbo*
- Pintail *Anas acuta*
- Ringed plover *Charadrius hiaticula*
- Grey plover *Pluvialis squatarola*
- Dunlin *Calidris alpina alpina*
- Black-tailed godwit *Limosa limosa islandica*

Appendix B Attributes of European Sites

- Redshank *Tringa tetanus*
- Shelduck *Tadorna tadorna*
- Great crested grebe *Podiceps cristatus*
- Curlew *Numenius arquata*
- Dark-bellied brent goose *Branta bernicla bernicla*
- Wigeon *Anas penelope*
- Goldeneye *Bucephala clangula*
- Oystercatcher *Haematopus ostralegus*
- Lapwing *Vanellus vanellus*
- Knot *Calidris canutus*
- Turnstone *Arenaria interpres*

Conservation objectives

B.7 With regard to the individual species and/or assemblage of species for which the site has been classified (“the Qualifying Features” listed below).

B.8 Avoid the deterioration of the habitats of the qualifying features, and the significant disturbance of the qualifying features, ensuring the integrity of the site is maintained and the site makes a full contribution to achieving the aims of the Birds Directive.

B.9 Subject to natural change, to maintain or restore:

- The extent and distribution of the habitats of the qualifying features;
- The structure and function of the habitats of the qualifying features;
- The supporting processes on which the habitats of the qualifying features rely;

- The populations of the qualifying features; and
- The distribution of the qualifying features within the site.

Key vulnerabilities

- Coastal squeeze – Coastal defences are present along most of the Orwell coastline to mitigate for impacts from climate change, such as rising sea level. Unless changes are made to the management of the coastline, habitats supporting qualifying SPA birds will be lost or degraded through coastal squeeze, sedimentation and reduced exposure.
- Public access/disturbance – Stour and Orwell Estuaries is subject to land- and water-based activities, including boating and water sports; walking; bait- digging; fishing; wildfowling; and military overflight training. These activities are likely to impact habitats supporting breeding and overwintering water birds. A better understanding of which species and habitats are most susceptible; which types of activity are most disturbing; and which locations and times of year are most sensitive is required to ensure the Estuaries are appropriately managed.
- Changes in species distribution – Declines in the number of bird species present at Orwell coastline have occurred. This is likely to be the result of changes in population and distribution on an international scale, due to climate change.
- Invasive species – An increase in *Spartina anglica* may be affecting the growth of *Spartina maritima*, a key habitat feature for qualifying bird roosting and feeding areas of saltmarsh and mudflat.
- Planning permission: General – The issue of development in combination with other factors is not fully understood. To ensure management is appropriate to the SPA a better understanding of the sensitivities relating to each habitat, species and location to different types of development is required. Difficult issues highlighted by the SIP include: a) Assessing the cumulative effects of numerous, small and often 'non-standard' developments; b) Development outside the SPA boundary can have negative impacts, particularly on the estuaries' birds; c) Assessing the

indirect, 'knock-on' effects of proposals; and d) Pressure to relax planning conditions on existing developments.

- Air pollution: Impact from atmospheric nitrogen deposition – Atmospheric nitrogen deposition exceeds the relevant critical loads for coastal dune habitats used by breeding terns and hence there is a risk of harmful effects.
- Inappropriate coastal management – Due to the presence of existing hard sea defences, such as sea walls there is little scope for adaptation to rising sea levels. Any freshwater habitats behind failing seawalls are likely to be inundated by seawater, which would result in the loss of this habitat within the SPA.
- Fisheries: Commercial and estuarine – Commercial fishing activities can be very damaging to inshore marine habitats and the bird species dependent on the communities they support. Any 'amber or green' categorised commercial fishing activities in Habitats Marine Sites are assessed by Kent and Essex Inshore Fisheries Conservation Authority (IFCA). This assessment takes into account any in-combination effects of amber activities and/or appropriate plans or projects.

Non-qualifying habitats and species upon which the qualifying habitats and/or species depend

B.10 In general, the qualifying bird species of the SPA rely on:

- The sites ecosystem as a whole (see list of habitats below);
- Maintenance of populations of species that they feed on (see list of diets below);
- Off-site habitat, which provide foraging habitat for these species; and
- Open landscape with unobstructed line of sight within nesting, foraging or roosting habitat.

Black-tailed godwit *Limosa limosa islandica*

- Habitat Preference – Marshy grassland and steppe, and on migration mudflats.
- Diet – Insects, worms and snails, but also some plants, beetles, grasshoppers and other small insects during the breeding season.

Dunlin *Calidris alpina alpina*

- Habitat Preference – Tundra, moor, heath, and on migration estuaries and coastal habitat.
- Diet – Tundra, moor, heath, and on migration estuaries and coastal habitat.

Grey plover *Pluvialis squatarola*

- Habitat Preference – Tundra, and on migration pasture and estuaries.
- Diet – In summer, invertebrates and in winter primarily marine worms, crustaceans and molluscs.

Pintail *Anas acuta*

- Habitat Preference – Lakes, rivers, marsh and tundra.
- Diet – A variety of plants and invertebrates.

Redshank *Tringa totanus*

- Habitat Preference – Rivers, wet grassland, moors and estuaries.
- Diet – Invertebrates, especially earthworms, crane fly larvae (inland) crustaceans, molluscs, marine worms (estuaries).

Ringed plover *Charadrius hiaticula*

- Habitat Preference – Sandy areas with low vegetation, and on migration estuaries.
- Diet – Mostly invertebrates, especially insects, molluscs and crustaceans.

Shelduck *Tadorna tadorna*

- Habitat Preference – Coasts, estuaries and lakes.
- Diet – Mostly invertebrates, especially insects, molluscs and crustaceans.

Turnstone *Arenaria interpres*

- Habitat Preference – On migration beaches and rocky coasts.
- Diet – Insects, crustaceans and molluscs.

Cormorant *Phalacrocorax carbo*

- Habitat Preference – Larger lakes and coastal.
- Diet – Fish.

Great crested grebe *Podiceps cristatus*

- Habitat Preference – Reed-bordered lakes, gravel pits, reservoirs and rivers. In the winter, they are also found along the coast.
- Diet – Mostly fish, some aquatic invertebrates especially in summer.

Curlew *Numenius arquata*

- Habitat Preference – Marsh, grassland and on migration mudflats.

- Diet – Worms, shellfish and shrimps.

Dark-bellied brent goose *Branta bernicla bernicla*

- Habitat Preference – Tundra, and on migration marshes and estuaries.
- Diet – Vegetation, especially eel-grass.

Wigeon *Anas penelope*

- Habitat Preference – Marsh, lakes, open moor, on migration estuaries.
- Diet – Mostly leaves, shoots, rhizomes and some seeds.

Goldeneye *Bucephala clangula*

- Habitat Preference – Lakes, rivers, and on migration seacoasts.
- Diet – Insects, molluscs and crustaceans.

Oystercatcher *Haematopus ostralegus*

- Habitat Preference – Sandy, muddy and rocky beaches.
- Diet – Mussels and cockles on the coast, mainly worms inland.

Lapwing *Vanellus vanellus*

- Habitat Preference – Pasture, arable land, wet meadow, on migration estuaries.
- Diet – Worms and insects.

Red knot *Calidris canutus islandica*

- Habitat Preference – Tundra, and on migration coastal habitat.
- Diet – In summer, insects and plant material, and in winter inter-tidal invertebrates, especially molluscs.

Knot *Calidris canutus*

- Habitat Preference – Coastal habitat.
- Diet – Insects and plant material during the summer; and inter-tidal invertebrates, especially molluscs during the winter.

Stour and Orwell Estuaries Ramsar site

Overview of site and its location

B.11 Refer to Stour and Orwell Estuaries SPA above.

Qualifying features

Ramsar criterion 2

B.12 Contains seven nationally scarce plants:

- Stiff saltmarsh-grass *Puccinellia rupestris*
- Small cord-grass *Spartina maritima*
- Perennial glasswort *Sarcocornia perennis*
- Lax-flowered sea lavender *Limonium humile*

- Eelgrasses *Zostera angustifolia*, *Z. marina* and *Z. noltei*

Ramsar criterion 5 – assemblages of international importance

B.13 Species with peak counts in winter:

- 63,017 waterfowl

Ramsar criterion 6 – species/populations occurring at levels of international importance

B.14 Species with peak counts in spring/autumn:

- Common redshank *Tringa totanus tetanus*

B.15 Species with peak counts in winter:

- Dark-bellied brent goose *Branta bernicla bernicla*
- Northern pintail *Anas acuta*
- Grey plover *Pluvialis squatarola*
- Red knot *Calidris canutus islandica*
- Dunlin *Calidris alpina alpina*
- Black-tailed godwit *Limosa limosa islandica*
- Common redshank

Conservation objectives

B.16 None available.

Key vulnerabilities

B.17 Similar to Stour and Orwell Estuaries SPA (see above).

B.18 A key threat identified by RIS was erosion.

- Erosion – Natural coastal processes exacerbated by fixed sea defences, port development and maintenance dredging. Erosion is being tackled through sediment replacement for additional erosion that can be attributed to port development and maintenance dredging. A realignment site has been created on-site to make up for the loss of habitat due to capital dredging. General background erosion has not been tackled although a Flood Management Strategy for the site is being produced.

Non-qualifying habitats and species upon which the qualifying habitats and/or species depend

- Plants – Plant communities are reliant on the coastal habitats within the Ramsar site. These habitats are dependent on a range of coastal factors and processes, including salinity, sedimentation, sea level, turbidity and elevation.
- Birds – Refer to Stour and Orwell Estuaries SPA above.

Deben Estuary SPA

Overview of site and its location

B.19 Deben Estuary is located on the coast of Suffolk in eastern England. It extends south-eastwards for over 12 kilometres from the town of Woodbridge to the sea just north of Felixstowe. The estuary mouth is the narrowest section and is protected by the presence of shifting sandbanks. The intertidal areas are

constrained by sea walls. The saltmarsh and intertidal mud-flats that occupy the majority of the site, however, display the most complete range of saltmarsh community types in Suffolk. The estuary holds a range of swamp communities that fringe the estuary, and occasionally form larger stands.

Qualifying features

- Dark-bellied brent goose *Branta bernicla bernicla*
- Pied avocet *Recurvirostra avosetta*

Conservation objectives

B.20 With regard to the SPA and the individual species and/or assemblage of species for which the site has been classified (the ‘Qualifying Features’ listed below), and subject to natural change.

B.21 Ensure that the integrity of the site is maintained or restored as appropriate, and ensure that the site contributes to achieving the aims of the Wild Birds Directive, by maintaining or restoring:

- The extent and distribution of the habitats of the qualifying features;
- The structure and function of the habitats of the qualifying features;
- The supporting processes on which the habitats of the qualifying features rely;
- The population of each of the qualifying features; and
- The distribution of the qualifying features within the site.

Key vulnerabilities

- Coastal squeeze – Examination of the quality of saltmarsh, rather than quantity (which had shown little change in extent) through a detailed

vegetation mapping survey of saltmarsh habitats (carried out to the National Vegetation Classification (NVC) standard (Abrehart and Jackson 2013)) provides evidence of coastal squeeze. Results were compared with an earlier NVC study (Suffolk Wildlife Trust 1993) and indicated that there had been a widespread decline in the quality of saltmarsh, and an increase in lower marsh habitats at the expense of mid and upper marsh vegetation communities. This is indicative of coastal squeeze as changes result from more frequent inundation. Also, coastal squeeze on saltmarsh will affect mudflat areas as saltmarsh is lost and the estuary balance/function is altered. This may have effects on SPA birds as well. The developing policy of the Deben Estuary Partnership should have scope for natural adaption.

- Public access/disturbance – Increased recreational activity on the estuary could lead to increased levels of disturbance to wintering birds, to their detriment. Sources of disturbance include boats, canoes, jet skis, walkers and dogs, kite surfers, paramotorists, and low flying aircraft, etc. Shooting activity outside the site is unregulated and may be a significant source of disturbance to wintering birds.
- Changes in species distribution – There is a risk of *Spartina anglica* encroaching on estuarine muds. With *Spartina* at the front, and reed encroaching at the back, the saltmarsh could be squeezed out affecting the habitats of birds.
- Air pollution: Risk of atmospheric nitrogen deposition – Air pollution impacts on vegetation diversity. Aerial deposits of nitrogen may exceed the threshold limit (20-30kg N ha⁻¹ yr⁻¹) above which the diversity of saltmarsh vegetation begins to be altered (possibly to reed) and adversely impacted. The impact on SPA birds is unclear. Many land use practices contribute to this issue including locally land spreading, outdoor pigs, high nutrient inputs on fields, etc.
- Water pollution – Inappropriate water quality may impact on the supporting habitats of SPA birds. Eutrophication may be having an influence on reed growth and saltmarsh composition. Increased flood events could lead to habitat change/loss of diversity. Nutrient run off from farming operations could exacerbate the issue.

Non-qualifying habitats and species upon which the qualifying habitats and/or species depend

B.22 In general, the qualifying bird species of the SPA rely on:

- The sites ecosystem as a whole (see list of habitats below);
- Maintenance of populations of species that they feed on (see list of diets below);
- Off-site habitat, which provide foraging habitat for these species; and
- Open landscape with unobstructed line of sight within nesting, foraging or roosting habitat.

Dark-bellied brent goose (Non-breeding) *Branta bernicla bernicla*

- Habitat Preference – Tundra, and on migration marshes and estuaries.
- Diet – Vegetation, especially eel-grass.

Pied avocet *Recurvirostra avosetta*

- Habitat Preference – Mudflats, lagoons, sandy beaches.
- Diet – Invertebrates, especially insects, crustaceans, worms and small fish.

Deben Estuary Ramsar site

Overview of site and its location

B.23 Refer to Deben Estuary SPA above.

Qualifying features

Ramsar criterion 2

B.24 Supports a population of the mollusc *Vertigo angustior* (Habitats Directive Annex II (S1014); British Red Data Book Endangered). Martlesham Creek is one of only about fourteen sites in Britain where this species survives.

Ramsar criterion 6 – species/populations occurring at levels of international importance

Qualifying species/populations (as identified at designation)

B.25 Species with peak counts in winter:

- Dark-bellied brent goose *Branta bernicla bernicla*

Conservation objectives

B.26 None available.

Key vulnerabilities

B.27 Similar to Deben Estuary SPA (above).

Non-qualifying habitats and species upon which
the qualifying habitats and/or species depend

B.28 Refer to Similar to Deben Estuary SPA (above).

References

- 1 [HM Government \(2007\) The Conservation \(Natural Habitats, &c.\) \(Amendment\) Regulations 2007 \(SI No. 2007/1843\)](#)
- 2 [HM Government \(2017\) The Conservation of Habitats and Species Regulations 2017 \(SI No. 2017/1012\), as amended by HM Government \(2019\) The Conservation of Habitats and Species \(Amendment\) \(EU Exit\) Regulations 2019 \(SI No. 2019/579\)](#)
- 3 The integrity of a site is the coherence of its ecological structure and function, across its whole area, that enables it to sustain the habitat, complex of habitats and/or the levels of populations of the species for which it was designated. (Source: UK Government Planning Practice Guidance)
- 4 [Department for Levelling Up, Housing and Communities \(2019\) Appropriate assessment: Guidance on the use of Habitats Regulations Assessment](#)
- 5 Directive 92/43/EEC of 21 May 1992 on the conservation of natural habitats and of wild fauna and flora (the 'Habitats Directive').
- 6 Directive 2009/147/EC of 30 November 2009 on the conservation of wild birds (the 'Birds Directive').
- 7 [The network of protected areas identified by the EU: European Commission \(2008\) Natura 2000](#)
- 8 [Department for Environment, Food and Rural Affairs \(2021\) Changes to the Habitats Regulations 2017](#)
- 9 [Department for Environment, Food and Rural Affairs, Natural England, Welsh Government and Natural Resources Wales \(2021\) Habitats regulations assessments: protecting a European site](#)
- 10 [Ministry of Housing, Communities and Local Government \(2024\) National Planning Policy Framework \(paragraph 194\)](#)
- 11 [David Tyldesley & Associates \(undated\) The HRA Handbook \(Section A3\)](#)
– A subscription based online guidance document

References

- 12 [Department for Environment, Food and Rural Affairs, Natural England, Welsh Government and Natural Resources Wales \(2021\) Habitats regulations assessments: protecting a European site](#)
- 13 Regulations 5 of the Habitats Regulations 2017.
- 14 [Department for Levelling Up, Housing and Communities \(2019\) Appropriate assessment: Guidance on the use of the Habitats Regulations Assessment](#)
- 15 European Commission (2001) Assessment of plans and projects significantly affecting European Sites. Methodological guidance on the provisions of Article 6(3) and (4) of the Habitats Directive 92/43/EEC
- 16 [David Tyldesley & Associates \(undated\) The HRA Handbook \(Section A3\)](#) – A subscription based online guidance document
- 17 [Natural England \(undated\) Conservation Objectives for European Sites](#)
- 18 In line with the CJEU judgement in Case C-323/17 People Over Wind v Coillte Teoranta, mitigation must only be taken into consideration at this stage and not during Stage 1: HRA Screening.
- 19 In addition to SAC and SPA citations and conservation objectives, key information sources for understanding factors contributing to the integrity of the sites include (where available) conservation objectives supplementary advice and Site Improvement Plans prepared by Natural England: [Natural England \(undated\) Site Improvement Plans by region](#)
- 20 A buffer distance of 20 kilometres has been applied based on the buffer distance applied to North Essex HRAs. This seems relevant given the large distances identified in relation to recreation.
- 21 Chapman, C. & Tyldesley, D. (2016) Functional linkage: How areas that are functionally linked to European sites have been considered when they may be affected by plans and projects 0 a review of authoritative decisions. Natural England Commissioned Reports, Number 207.
- 22 Obtained from the [Natural England website](#).
- 23 [Natural England \(undated\) Conservation Objectives for European Sites](#)
- 24 SI No. 2017/2012.

References

- 25 ECJ Case C-127/02 “Waddenzee” Jan 2004.
- 26 [David Tyldesley & Associates \(undated\) The HRA Handbook \(Section A3\)](#)
– A subscription based online guidance document
- 27 [David Tyldesley & Associates \(undated\) The HRA Handbook \(Section A3\)](#)
– A subscription based online guidance document
- 28 British Wildlife Magazine (October 2007)
- 29 Wealden v SSCLG [2017] EWHC 351 (Admin).
- 30 [JNCC \(2019\) UK Protected Area Datasets for Download](#)
- 31 [Natural England \(2014-2015\) Site Improvement Plans: East of England](#)
- 32 [Natural England \(undated\) Conservation Objectives for European Sites](#)

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