

Proposed development Name:	Vatersay Pier
Document Title:	Vatersay Pier: Ornithology DBA December 2025
Client Name:	Vatersay Pier Users Association (VPUA)
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1.1 Introduction

1.1.1 Purpose of the Briefing Note

This desk-based ornithology assessment (DBA) has been prepared to inform internal discussions and to seek pre-application advice from NatureScot. It provides a proportionate, precautionary overview of potential interactions between the Proposed Development and designated bird interests, to inform Environmental Impact Assessment (EIA) Screening.

1.2 Project Description, Scale and Context

1.2.1 Overview

This section gives a description of the project and the proposed development location.

In summary:

- Total project footprint (including onshore elements): ~2.3 ha
- In-water footprint: ~1.6 ha
- SPA extent: ~132,170 ha

Construction is expected to last approximately 12 months and involves blasting within an existing quarry onshore. The expected worst-case scenario is approximately 20 blasts, spaced apart by 3 days of no blasting, which works out as 20 blasts over 2.5 months.

1.2.2 Site Location

The area within the consolidated temporary and permanent works area for the proposed development (hereafter referred to as the 'Site') is located on the island of Vatersay, Outer Hebrides.

The Site location is shown in Figure 1. In order to reflect to the various individual consent application requirements for different elements of the proposed development, indicative application boundary areas are illustrated.

The Site is approximately 1.5 hectares (ha) above mean low water springs (MLWS) and approximately 1.8ha below mean high water springs (MHWS), there is approximately 0.8 ha of overlap between the two areas, this is the inter-tidal zone.

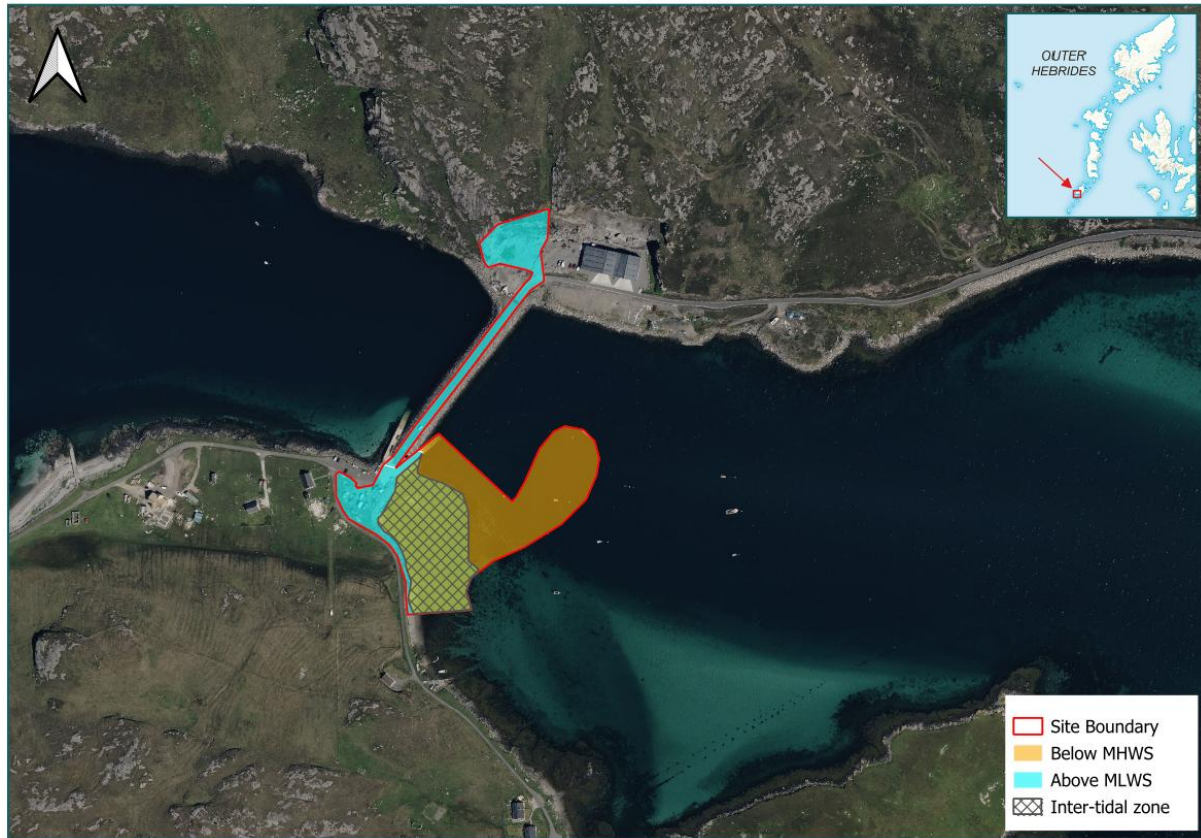


Figure 1 Site location plan

1.2.3 Project description

The island of Vatersay is located at the southern end of the Outer Hebrides and has been connected to the neighbouring island of Barra by a causeway since 1991.

Vatersay is home to nine fishing vessels, crew and several small leisure crafts. There are currently no suitable facilities on the island for sheltered berthing.

The proposed development has the potential to create a more sustainable marine economy in a remote area, and the potential to enable the local economy to diversify into ancillary activities, including aquaculture, small cargo handling, marine harvesting processing and support renewable energy activities.

The proposed development comprises the following components which transition both onshore and offshore environment (see preliminary layout in figure 2);

- breakwater to provide shelter for all berths;
- pontoon berthing for approximately 14 vessels; and
- small pier to accommodate visiting fishing vessels up to 20 metres (m) in length.

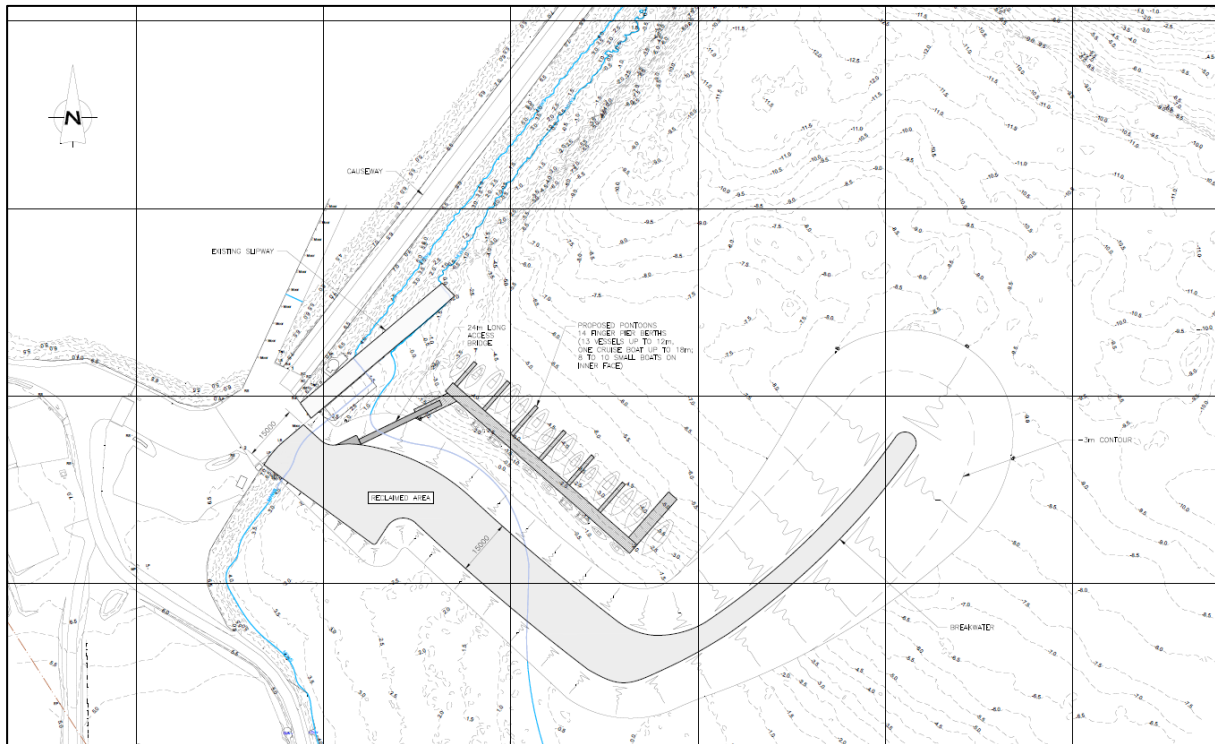


Figure 2 Preliminary layout

Other related works include use of the borrow pit on the Barra side of the causeway. The Vatersay Causeway was constructed between 1989 and 1991, the rock used in its construction was sourced from the hillside immediately adjacent to site, on the Barra side. The proposed development will require large quantities of rock for the purposes of fill and armour and the rock is intended to be sourced from the borrow pit.

1.2.4 Environmental Designations

The proposed development is located within, and in proximity, to numerous statutory designated sites including:

- West Coast of the Outer Hebrides Special Protection Area (SPA);
- Sound of Barra Special Area of Conservation (SAC); and
- Sea of Hebrides Marine Protected Area (MPA).

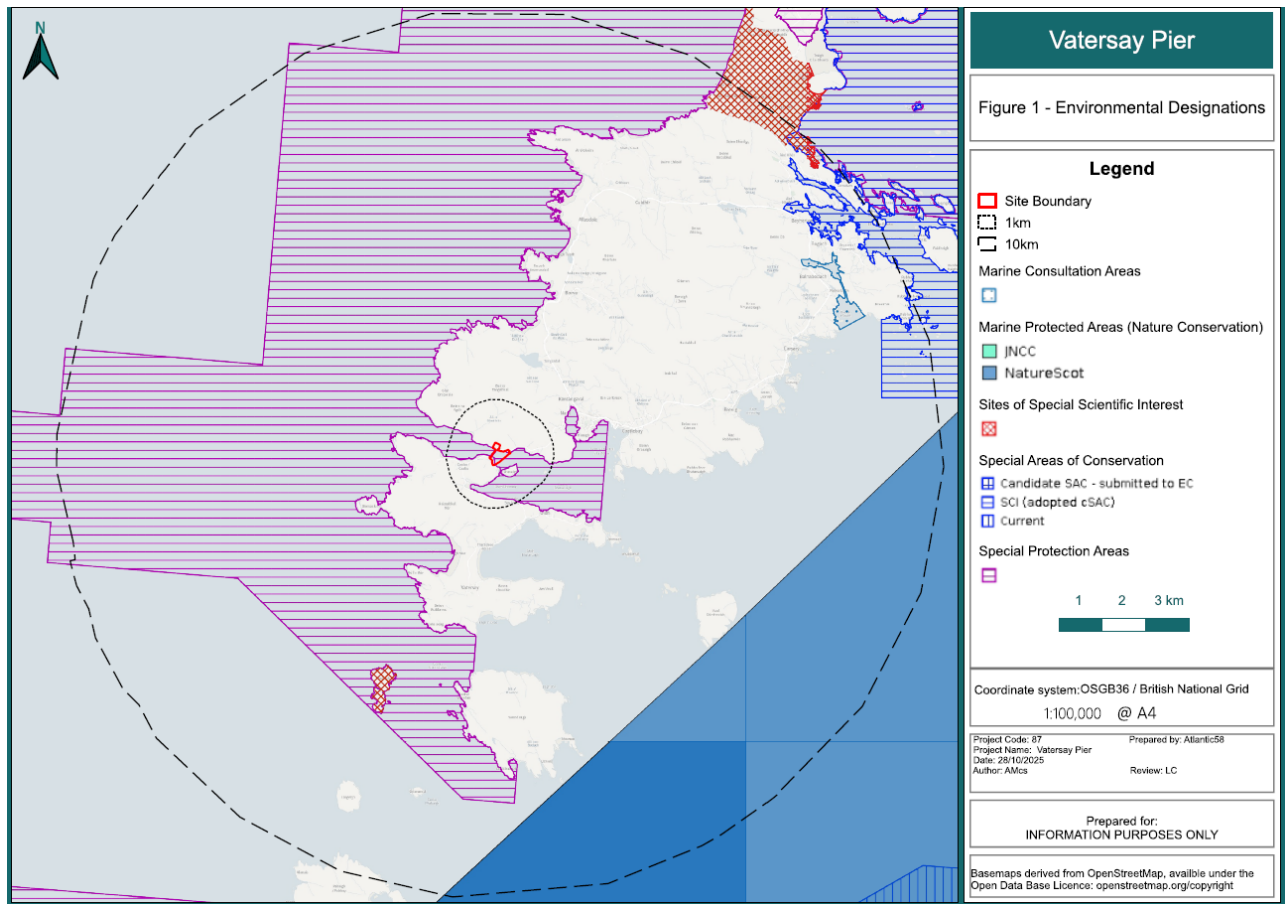


Figure 3 Environmental designations

1.3 Designated Sites and Bird Interests

The proposal lies within the West Coast of the Outer Hebrides SPA. The SPA is designated for:

- Breeding red-throated diver (foraging areas only); and
- Non-breeding aggregations of Annex I and migratory waterbird species associated with inshore waters (including divers, seaducks and grebes).

The Sea of the Hebrides MPA lies within the wider marine environment (approximately 6.8 km from the red line boundary). As birds are not protected features of the MPA, it is considered only in respect of indirect and theoretical pathways. Given the small scale of the in-water footprint (approximately 1.6 ha), the nearshore location of the works and the absence of any plausible mechanism for prey depletion at a scale relevant to the MPA conservation objectives, no interaction with the MPA is anticipated in relation to birds.

1.4 Impact Pathways Considered

At a desk-based level, two ornithological pathways are considered relevant:

- Temporary disturbance and displacement during construction, arising from vessels, plant and marine works within a localised area.

2. Permanent loss or alteration of in-water habitat, limited to approximately 1.6 ha within the footprint of the infrastructure.

The operational phase would also result in a change in the distribution of vessel activity within Vatersay Sound. However, review of aerial imagery and local information indicates that vessels are already moored within the Sound, with approximately ten vessels present prior to development. As such, the operational phase would largely formalise and modestly reorganise existing baseline human activity, rather than introduce new activity into a previously undisturbed environment.

The operational use of the facility is expected to be passive in nature, with no ongoing sources of significant disturbance once construction is complete.

No other pathways (e.g. collision risk, barrier effects, lighting, large-scale prey depletion) are considered plausible given the nature of the proposal.

This DBA is carried out under the assumption that no other projects are proposed or consented within the vicinity.

1.5 Behavioural and Ecological Considerations

Ecological evidence indicates that:

- Breeding red-throated divers forage over wide areas of inshore waters, functioning as central-place foragers during the breeding season, with foraging ranges extending tens of kilometres from nesting lochs (JNCC, 2015; NatureScot, 2023).
- Non-breeding SPA features are mobile, use a mosaic of inshore habitats, and redistribute in response to environmental conditions and disturbance (Balmer et al., 2013; Furness, 2015).
- The scale of permanent habitat loss is very small relative to the extent of available inshore habitat within the SPA, such that effects must be considered at the scale of functional habitat availability rather than localised habitat change (JNCC, 2015).
- Aerial imagery and local information indicate existing baseline vessel activity within Vatersay Sound, such that the operational phase would largely formalise existing use rather than introduce activity into a previously undisturbed environment (NatureScot, 2017).

Ecological information in Table 1 on foraging ranges, habitat use, diving depth and prey types has been derived from NatureScot and JNCC guidance and standard UK seabird ecology sources (Balmer et al., 2013; Furness, 2015; JNCC, 2015; NatureScot, 2017; NatureScot, 2023).

1.6 Summary of Findings

At a desk-based level:

- Temporary disturbance during construction would be localised and time-limited.
- Permanent habitat loss would be small in scale (c.1.6 ha) and would not affect the availability or functional extent of inshore foraging habitat at SPA scale.
- There is no credible mechanism by which the project could undermine the conservation objectives of the SPA for either breeding red-throated diver or non-breeding qualifying features.

1.7 Conclusion

On the basis of this DBA, the potential for the project to give rise to effects capable of undermining SPA conservation objectives is considered very limited. Effects on ornithological qualifying features are therefore appropriately considered further at a screening level, informed by the detailed tables within the DBA. NatureScot advice is sought to confirm this position and to identify whether any further proportionate information is required to support EIA Screening.

References

Balmer, D.E., Gillings, S., Caffrey, B.J., Swann, R.L., Downie, I.S. and Fuller, R.J. (2013) Bird Atlas 2007–11: The Breeding and Wintering Birds of Britain and Ireland. Thetford: British Trust for Ornithology.

Furness, R.W. (2015) Seabird Ecology. Oxford: Oxford University Press.

Joint Nature Conservation Committee (JNCC) (2015) Identification of important marine areas for breeding red-throated diver *Gavia stellata* in the UK. JNCC Report No. 541. Peterborough: Joint Nature Conservation Committee.

Joint Nature Conservation Committee (JNCC) (various years) West Coast of the Outer Hebrides Special Protection Area: Citation and Conservation Advice. Available at: <https://jncc.gov.uk> (Accessed: 16 December 2025).

NatureScot (2017) Marine bird sensitivity to disturbance and habitat change. Inverness: NatureScot.

NatureScot (2023) Guidance to support marine bird impact assessment: identifying theoretical foraging ranges. Available at: <https://www.nature.scot> (Accessed: 16 December 2025).

Table 1 SPA ecological information

Qualifying feature	SPA designation basis	Relevant season(s)	Typical habitat use	Indicative winter foraging range	Typical foraging depth	Main prey types (winter)	Screening rationale (summary)
Red-throated diver	Breeding (foraging areas)	Apr - Aug	Inshore coastal waters used by breeding birds commuting from inland nesting lochans	Typically 10–30 km from nesting sites	Surface to ≤15 m	Small fish	Breeding red-throated divers forage over wide areas of inshore waters. The small, localised in-water footprint and temporary nature of disturbance would not affect the availability or functional extent of foraging habitat at a scale relevant to the SPA conservation objective (JNCC, 2015; NatureScot, 2023).
Great northern diver	Non-breeding	Oct–Mar	Inshore and coastal waters	Typically 5–20 km from core wintering areas	Surface to ≤20 m	Fish (e.g. cod, haddock, flatfish), occasional crustaceans	Temporary disturbance and displacement during construction would be localised and time-limited, and the permanent loss of approximately 1.6 ha of in-water habitat would represent a very small proportion of available inshore habitat within the SPA. Given the mobility and winter foraging ecology of the species, these effects would not affect non-breeding distribution or use of the SPA at a scale relevant to the conservation objectives (Balmer et al., 2013; Furness, 2015; NatureScot, 2017).
Black-throated diver	Non-breeding	Oct–Mar	Inshore coastal waters	Typically 5–15 km	Surface to ≤20 m	Small to medium-sized fish	Temporary disturbance and displacement during construction would be localised and time-limited, and the permanent loss of approximately 1.6 ha of in-water habitat would represent a very small proportion of available inshore habitat within the SPA. Given the mobility and winter foraging ecology of the species, these effects would not affect non-breeding distribution or use of the SPA at a scale relevant to the conservation objectives.

Qualifying feature	SPA designation basis	Relevant season(s)	Typical habitat use	Indicative winter foraging range	Typical foraging depth	Main prey types (winter)	Screening rationale (summary)
Slavonian grebe	Non-breeding	Oct–Mar	Sheltered inshore waters, bays	Generally <10 km, often much smaller core areas	Surface to ≤15 m	Small fish, crustaceans	Temporary disturbance and displacement during construction would be localised and time-limited, and the permanent loss of approximately 1.6 ha of in-water habitat would represent a very small proportion of available inshore habitat within the SPA. Given the mobility and winter foraging ecology of the species, these effects would not affect non-breeding distribution or use of the SPA at a scale relevant to the conservation objectives.
Common eider	Non-breeding	Oct–Mar	Nearshore and inshore waters	Typically <10 km, flexible between feeding areas	Shallow waters, typically <10 m	Bivalves (mussels, cockles), crustaceans	Temporary disturbance and displacement during construction would be localised and time-limited, and the permanent loss of approximately 1.6 ha of in-water habitat would represent a very small proportion of available inshore habitat within the SPA. Given the mobility and winter foraging ecology of the species, these effects would not affect non-breeding distribution or use of the SPA at a scale relevant to the conservation objectives.
Long-tailed duck	Non-breeding	Oct–Mar	Inshore and shallow coastal waters	Typically 5–20 km, shifting with conditions	Typically 5–30 m	Molluscs, crustaceans, small fish	Temporary disturbance and displacement during construction would be localised and time-limited, and the permanent loss of approximately 1.6 ha of in-water habitat would represent a very small proportion of available inshore habitat within the SPA. Given the mobility and winter foraging ecology of the species, these effects would not affect non-breeding distribution or use of the SPA at a scale relevant to the conservation objectives.

Qualifying feature	SPA designation basis	Relevant season(s)	Typical habitat use	Indicative winter foraging range	Typical foraging depth	Main prey types (winter)	Screening rationale (summary)
Red-breasted merganser	Non-breeding	Oct–Mar	Inshore waters, bays and sea lochs	Typically <10 km, regular local movements	Surface to ≤15 m	Small fish, crustaceans	Temporary disturbance and displacement during construction would be localised and time-limited, and the permanent loss of approximately 1.6 ha of in-water habitat would represent a very small proportion of available inshore habitat within the SPA. Given the mobility and winter foraging ecology of the species, these effects would not affect non-breeding distribution or use of the SPA at a scale relevant to the conservation objectives.