



Port of Inverness Barge Berth Habitats Regulations Appraisal Screening Document

Port of INVERNESS

Report No. 139_REP_09_1

Date: 27/08/2026

Document Control

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Effective Date:	27/08/2026
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Revision No:	Signature	Comments	Date
1	[Redacted]	For issue.	27/08/2026

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1 Introduction

Inverness Harbour Trust (IHT) own and operate the Port of Inverness (POI). IHT are proposing to construct a new barge berth to accommodate small vessels and barges. The proposed barge berth will consist of a sheet-piled quayside and a floating pontoon, accessed via a linkspan. The new barge berth aims to facilitate renewables projects essential to the United Kingdom's energy resilience and security. The primary purpose is to enable the transport of materials and plant equipment to the proposed and consented Pumped Storage Hydro Schemes in the Great Glen, via the Caledonian Canal, thereby reducing the burden on the local road network and decarbonising the supply chain through utilisation of the historical canal network.

Several European sites (Special Protection Areas (SPAs), Special Areas of Conservation (SACs)), as well as Ramsar sites are situated within the wider locality of the site. A Habitats Regulations Appraisal (HRA) is required for this development due to the potential for works to have a Likely Significant Effect (LSE) on these European sites. The competent authority may be required to undertake an Appropriate Assessment (AA) if LSE are identified for any qualifying interests.

This HRA Screening Document has been produced to initially screen for where there may be ecological connectivity and/or LSE on the qualifying features of any designated sites. This document will be submitted to the relevant consenting bodies along with the request for a screening opinion which is supported by the Environmental Impact Assessment (EIA) Screening Report (Affric, 2026a). It is assumed that the consenting bodies will consult with NatureScot with regard to both the HRA Screening and Screening Opinion request. As the proposed development will require removal and deposition of materials from a vehicle below the Mean High Water Springs (MHWS), a marine licence is also being sought.

The information to support the competent authority in undertaking an AA will be provided in a full HRA Supporting Document following consultation with NatureScot. An AA will only be required if there is considered to be an LSE to any qualifying interests.

1.1 Legislative Context

Articles 6(3) and 6(4) of the Habitats Directive (92/43/EEC) are implemented in Scotland through The Conservation (Natural Habitats, &c.) Regulations 1994 as amended (hereafter referred to as the 'Habitats Regulations').

Under the Habitats Regulations proposed plans or projects that could affect a European site (including SACs, designated under the Habitats Directive (1992), and SPAs, designated under the Birds Directive (2009)) should be subject to an HRA to assess whether the effect of the plan or project is likely to be significant. In particular, Regulation 48 of the Habitats Regulations dictates that any plan or project, which may result in LSE on any qualifying interests associated with 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, shall be subject to an AA. The AA must demonstrate that the proposal will not adversely affect the site integrity (NatureScot, 2021).

1.2 Terminology

The terminology employed in the HRA process is specific, and in some instances the words have a meaning distinct from the common usage.

1.2.1 European Site

In Scotland, European sites include SPAs and SACs, 'candidate' SACs (cSACs) and proposed SPAs (pSPAs) and SACs (pSACs) approved by Scottish Ministers for formal consultation.

1.2.2 Ramsar Site

A Ramsar site is a site listed as a wetland of international importance under the provisions of the 'Ramsar Convention' (NatureScot, 2025a). In Scotland, most Ramsar sites overlap with European sites and/or Sites of Special Scientific Interest (SSSI) in geographic extent and qualifying features and thus are protected under the relevant statutory regimes. For land use change decision-making, all Ramsar sites must be treated as though they are European sites as detailed in Scottish Government (2025) with the same level of legal protection (Natural Environment (Scotland) Act 2026). This means that plans or projects on or affecting any features of a Ramsar site must be subject to an HRA.

1.2.3 Likely Significant Effect

A project component is identified to result in an LSE if there is potential ecological connectivity between a qualifying interest associated with a European site and the proposed works area, and the proposed works are anticipated to have an adverse effect upon the conservation objectives of the European site in the absence of mitigation. As such, the conservation objectives of the site provide the framework for considering the potential for LSE. Where an LSE: '*cannot be excluded, on the basis of objective information*' (NatureScot, 2022a), or without the use of mitigation, an AA is required.

1.2.4 Appropriate Assessment

An AA is used to demonstrate whether there will be an adverse effect on site integrity. If no adverse effects are identified using reasonable scientific insight, a proposed project can generally be approved. If the AA cannot rule out adverse effects on site integrity, a project would only receive consent if:

- Imperative Reasons of Overriding Public Interest (IROPI) are proved; and
- There are not satisfactory alternatives.

1.2.5 Competent Authority

A 'competent authority' is the authority responsible for making decisions as to whether proposed projects or plans can proceed. Under the Habitats Regulations, this term encompasses any Minister, government department, public or statutory undertaker, public body of any kind, or any individual holding a public office (NatureScot, 2021).

2 Objectives

The objectives of this HRA Screening Document are to:

- Outline the details of the proposed works;
- Consider whether there is any potential ecological connectivity between the proposed works and any qualifying features associated with European Sites;
- Consider whether there is the potential for LSE, as a result of the development, on any of the conservation objectives of sites identified; and

- Outline which qualifying interests of European sites or Ramsar sites proposed to be scoped in for AA.

3 Proposed Activity

3.1 Project Description

The proposed works for the new barge berth will allow the POI to be used as a transfer hub for material, cargo and equipment from larger vessels onto canal-compatible vessels/barges for transit via the Caledonian Canal to Loch Ness, the Great Glen and beyond. The proposal involves the installation and operation of a new barge berth consisting of a quay, pontoon, fendering piles, a linkspan with a concrete ramp and abutment.

The barge berth has been designed to accommodate two types of vessels, specifically designed for transiting the canal network with materials and equipment. The vessels are similar in dimension; a box, or hopper type barge which will require a berth that allows loading directly from the quayside using a crane, and a landing craft barge with roll-on roll-off ('Ro-Ro') capabilities for cargo. The floating pontoon will be accessed via a hydraulic linkspan, allowing for roll-on/roll-off cargo in all tide states.

The existing disused boatshed will be demolished as part of the new quay development to enable space for material and plant movements, supporting the intended diversification of port operations. Localised dredging will be required to create appropriate water depths alongside the new pontoon and fender piles.

The new barge berth will facilitate the delivery and transport of construction materials via the waterways, particularly for those designated for Loch Ness, alleviating the volume of Heavy Goods Vehicles (HGV) traffic utilising the local road network and minimising traffic impacts on local communities. With this project, IHT will also reintroduce the ability for material transport via the Caledonian Canal once again, with opportunities to further decarbonise the supply chain of renewable energy developments in the Highlands. The proposed works area is 3,320m² as shown in Drawing 139_DRG_08_01: Barge Berth Location Plan.

3.2 Location

The POI is located at the mouth of the River Ness, close to the river confluence with the Beaully Firth in the City of Inverness. The proposed works will be located entirely within the POI port limits and IHT harbour limits. The proposed works will be sited between the existing Longman Quay and North Citadel Quay, adjacent to Cromwell Road/Longman Drive at Centre Point National Grid Reference (NGR): NH 66306 46463 (see Drawing 139_DRG_08_01: Barge Berth Location Plan). The proposed works will be situated in transitional waters, on the east bank of the River Ness. The development boundaries for both marine licensing and planning permission are shown in Drawing 139_DRG_08_01: Barge Berth Location Plan).

3.3 Timeline

The works are proposed to begin in 2027, and construction is expected to take 18 months. This roughly aligns with the construction of the first of the hydro schemes proposed for the Great Glen, which is understood to be due to commence within the next 18 months. The construction programme will be phased to allow some tasks to be completed concurrently.

3.4 Design

The key elements of the development design are described below, with construction techniques described in Section 3.4. The design layout is depicted in Drawing 2021-221: Proposed Barge and Bridge Site Location and Drawing 2021-222: Proposed Barge and Bridge Plan and Elevations.

The new quay will comprise a ~60m sheet-piled quay wall. Sheet piles will be placed perpendicular at the north-west end of the quay to tie the structure back into land, while at the south-east end there will be a short section of piles to tie into the abutment for the linkspan. The quay sheet piles will be laterally supported by tie rods attached to sheet-piled anchor walls set into the ground between 8m and 12m from the quay piles. The top of the quay walls will be set at 5.68m above Ordnance Datum (OD), in line with the adjacent North Citadel Quay, and finished with a reinforced concrete capping beam. The sheet-piled structure will be infilled, compacted and surfaced with aggregate.

A cantilever sheet-piled wall will be installed at the north-west end of the 60m quay wall described above; this will be ~40m. The cantilever pile wall is a retaining structure required to facilitate the dredging of the berth. The piles will hold back the ground using the internal strength of the piles and passive resistance from the riverbed without the need for anchor piles and tie rods. The cantilever wall will be trimmed to suit the profile of the surrounding ground, such that it doesn't protrude from the seabed significantly and will not all be visible above the water level.

Two steel tubular fender piles will be installed in front of the cantilever wall to aid the vessels whilst they are manoeuvred into position, and to hold position when accessing the pontoon. These will have associated fendering attached to absorb any impacts from vessels.

The abutment to the south-east end of the quay will tie into the North Citadel Quay and provide access to a new linkspan via a concrete slab and a 1:20 gradient concrete ramp. The steel linkspan, fixed at the south-east end to the abutment, will be ~40m long and ~8m wide, providing access to a pontoon.

The removable floating pontoon, fixed in place by four steel tubular mooring piles, will be situated alongside the new quay wall. The pontoon will be sized appropriately for the barge vessels destined to be used for transport via the Caledonian Canal. The proposed pontoon is currently 25m x 15m, but this will be confirmed with the supplier upon further design development. The pontoon will rise and fall with the tide, maintaining the transition from the vessel to the linkspan at all tidal states.

As part of the development of the quay, the redundant boatshed located within the development footprint will be demolished. Suitable water depth for berthing will be created by dredging to -3m Chart Datum (CD), matching the depth of the river and adjacent North Citadel Quay.

3.5 Likely Construction Techniques

The proposed development will be constructed through the following steps:

- Site establishment;
- Boatshed demolition;
- Site clearance;

- Pile installation;
- Quay infilling and surfacing;
- Concrete works;
- Dredging;
- Deployment of the pontoon;
- Installation of the linkspan;
- Furniture and finishes; and
- Demobilisation.

A detailed description of the proposed activity is available in the EIA Screening Report (139_REP_08 Port of Inverness Barge Berth EIA Screening Report).

3.6 Operations Phase

The new barge berth will be used to load and unload materials in keeping with existing POI operations. The berth will provide a dedicated transfer point for cargo. In particular, it is intended this will involve the transfer of materials arriving by sea onto vessels that are appropriately sized and compatible for onward transport through the Caledonian Canal, as required to support construction of hydro schemes in the Great Glen. It is envisaged this will considerably alleviate the number of HGV deliveries associated with hydro scheme construction utilising the local road network, thereby minimising traffic impacts on local communities.

Operations will therefore involve predominantly vessel, plant and material movements as is expected for an operational port. Note, there is no additional permanent lighting required or included as part of the scheme.

It is expected that once these schemes have been built, the barges will be handed over to Scottish Canals to operate a legacy freight service connecting the East and West coasts, re-purposing the Caledonian Canal to its original purpose of freight movement.

Maintenance dredging may be required over time and, if required, would be adopted into POI's maintenance dredge campaigns, subject to pre-dredge sampling results and licensing. The extent of maintenance dredging would be very small, within POI port limits and within the boundary of previous dredge licences.

The new infrastructure itself will require very little maintenance. This will be limited to occasional lubrication of the sliding bearings where the bridge lands on the pontoon, and replacement of sacrificial anodes on the barge once every 10 years.

3.7 Decommissioning

The barge berth quayside has a design life of circa 50 years, and there are no foreseeable decommissioning plans for the POI. The new infrastructure will be maintained in a useable state for as long as practicable, and is likely to facilitate a freight service along the Caledonian Canal for as long as needs dictate. If the design elements of the proposal were to be decommissioned, the elements could be removed in more-or-less a reverse of the construction process.

4 Screening Approach

4.1 Ecological Connectivity to Designated Sites

European and Ramsar sites relevant to the proposed development were identified using SiteLink (NatureScot, 2026) and the National Marine Plan interactive (NMPi) mapping tool (Marine Directorate, 2026a). An initial search for sites within a radius of 25km of the proposed development was undertaken, ensuring that no nearby sites relevant to the project were missed. Potential pathways between the proposed works and possible receptors highlighted if there were designated sites outwith 25km that should also be considered due to the potential for LSE on their qualifying interests. For sites located within transitional environments, consideration was also given to potential hydrological connectivity, including those situated upstream and downstream of the proposed development.

Following identification of sites, a screening exercise was undertaken to determine potential ecological connectivity between the proposed development and the qualifying features of each site.

In Scotland, Ramsar sites typically overlap with an SPA, SAC, or SSSI designation, with corresponding qualifying features. To avoid unnecessary repetition, where the geographical range, qualifying features and conservation objectives of a Ramsar site are also covered by an SPA or SAC, only components not considered within the SPA or SAC will be taken forward for LSE assessment where necessary. Any Ramsar sites covered by a SSSI will be fully considered.

4.2 Consideration of Likely Significant Effects

Sites where ecological connectivity could not be ruled out were screened in for further assessment, with consideration of the potential for LSE on their conservation objectives. If LSE could not be ruled out beyond reasonable doubt, either by proposed development alone or in-combination with other plans or projects, the site was screened in for AA.

5 Ecological Connectivity to Designated Sites

The designated sites relevant to the proposed development and their qualifying features are presented in Table 5.1.1, arranged by distance from the project. Each site, or relevant qualifying feature, is assessed for potential ecological connectivity with the proposed activity.

Drawing DRG_139_07_1: European and Ramsar Sites depicts these sites in relation to the proposed development.

Table 5.1.1: Review of Ecological Connectivity Between Relevant European and Ramsar sites and the Proposed Works

Designated Site	Distance (approximate) and Direction	Qualifying Feature(s)	Ecological Connectivity Identified
Moray Firth SAC (NatureScot, 2025b)	0.76 km north (N)	Bottlenose Dolphin (<i>Tursiops truncatus</i>)	Yes – See Section 6.1.
		Subtidal sandbank	No – Subtidal sandbanks are present throughout the Moray Firth (NatureScot, 2016). However, the subtidal sandbanks associated with the SAC have not been reported near the proposed development (NatureScot, 2024a). There is a small risk of indirect effects to sediment transport due to changes in the currents. However, given the small-scale of the development and the distance of the known subtidal sandbanks from the site, it is not anticipated that there will be a noticeable impact. Therefore, the proposed works are not expected to result in any direct loss of subtidal sandbanks.
Moray Firth SPA (NatureScot, 2022b)	0.95 N	Non-breeding - Common scoter (<i>Melanitta nigra</i>) - Eider (<i>Somateria mollissima</i>) - Goldeneye (<i>Bucephala clangula</i>) - Great northern diver (<i>Gavia immer</i>) - Long-tailed duck (<i>Clangula hyemalis</i>) - Red-breasted merganser (<i>Mergus serrator</i>) - Red-throated diver (<i>Gavia stellata</i>) - Scaup (<i>Aythya marila</i>) - Shag (<i>Gulosus aristotelis</i>) - Slavonian grebe (<i>Podiceps auritus</i>)	Yes – See Section 6.2.

Designated Site	Distance (approximate) and Direction	Qualifying Feature(s)	Ecological Connectivity Identified
		Velvet scoter (<i>Melanitta fusca</i>)	
		Breeding Shag	Yes – See Section 6.2.
Inner Moray Firth SPA (NatureScot, 1999a)	2.43 km southwest (SW) (The site is comprised of multiple land parcels)	Non-breeding - Bar-tailed godwit (<i>Limosa lapponica</i>) - Cormorant (<i>Phalacrocorax carbo</i>) - Curlew (<i>Numenius arquata</i>) - Goldeneye - Goosander (<i>Mergus merganser</i>) - Greylag goose (<i>Anser anser</i>) - Oystercatcher (<i>Haematopus ostralegus</i>) - Red-breasted merganser - Redshank (<i>Tringa tetanus</i>) - Scaup - Teal (<i>Anas crecca</i>) - Waterfowl assemblage - Wigeon (<i>Anas penelope</i>)	Yes – See Section 6.3.
		Breeding - Common tern (<i>Sterna hirundo</i>) - Osprey (<i>Pandion haliaetus</i>)	Yes – See Section 6.3.
Inner Moray Firth Ramsar	2.43km west (W) (from west site boundary)	- Intertidal mudflats and sandflats - Sandflat - Mudflat	No – Due to the small scale of the development, effects to habitat will be localised. Considering the distance of the habitats from the

Designated Site	Distance (approximate) and Direction	Qualifying Feature(s)	Ecological Connectivity Identified
(NatureScot, 1999b)	2.62km east (E) (from east site boundary) (The site is comprised of multiple land parcels)	• Saltmarsh • Sand dune • Shingle	proposed development (Scottish Environment Protection Agency (SEPA), 2018), there is no connectivity identified.
		Non-breeding • Bar-tailed godwit Cormorant • Curlew • Goldeneye • Goosander • Greylag goose • Oystercatcher • Red-breasted merganser • Redshank Scaup • Teal • Waterfowl assemblage • Wigeon	Yes – Considered within Inner Moray Firth SPA, see Section 6.3.
		Breeding • Common tern • Osprey	Yes- Considered within Inner Moray Firth SPA, see Section 6.3.
Monadh Mor SAC (NatureScot, 2020a)	9.77 km northwest (NW)	• Bog woodland • Very wet mires often identified by an unstable 'quaking' surface	No – Distance from the proposed development means no connectivity was identified for the listed terrestrial habitats.
Dam Wood SAC (NatureScot, 2020b)	10.36 km north-northwest (NNW)	• Base-rich fens • Juniper on heaths or calcareous grasslands	No – Distance from the proposed development means no connectivity was identified for the listed terrestrial habitats.

Designated Site	Distance (approximate) and Direction	Qualifying Feature(s)	Ecological Connectivity Identified
Moniack Gorge SAC (NatureScot, 2020c)	10.71 km SW	Green shield-moss (<i>Buxbaumia viridis</i>)	No – Distance from the proposed development means no connectivity was identified for the listed plant species.
Loch Ashie SPA (NatureScot, 1997a)	10.81 km south-southwest (SSW)	Passage Slavonian grebe	No – Slavonian grebe gather in Loch Ashie during moulting periods when the birds are flightless (NatureScot, 1997a). Thus, there is no connectivity with the proposed development. Furthermore, there is no evidence on the National Biodiversity Network (NBN) Atlas that Slavonian grebes use habitats adjacent to the proposed development (NBN Atlas, 2026).
Cromarty Firth SPA (NatureScot, 1999c)	14.58 km NW (The site is comprised of multiple land parcels)	Non-breeding - Bar-tailed godwit - Knot (<i>Calidris canutus</i>) - Pintail (<i>Anas acuta</i>) - Red-breasted merganser - Scaup - Waterfowl assemblage - Wigeon	Yes – See Section 6.4.
		Non-breeding - Curlew - Dunlin (<i>Calidris alpina alpina</i>) - Greylag goose - Oystercatcher - Redshank - Whooper swan (<i>Cygnus cygnus</i>)	No – The proposed development is outwith the foraging ranges of the wintering curlew (2 km), dunlin (3 km) and whooper swan (5 km) associated with the Cromarty Firth SPA (Scottish Natural Heritage (SNH) (now NatureScot), 2016). Oystercatcher and redshank exhibit site-fidelity and are faithful to wintering sites year-on-year (Burton, 2000; Griffin <i>et al.</i> , 2023), occasionally venturing to a neighbouring site. Thus, due to the distance of the proposed development, oystercatcher and redshank

Designated Site	Distance (approximate) and Direction	Qualifying Feature(s)	Ecological Connectivity Identified
			associated with the Cromarty Firth SPA will not be found near the proposed development. The greylag goose winters in low-lying agricultural habitat, which is not found within the development boundary or immediate surrounding area (NatureScot, 2024a). As such, there is no connectivity identified for curlew, dunlin, whooper swan, oystercatcher, redshank or greylag goose.
		Breeding Common tern	Yes – See Section 6.4.
		Breeding Osprey	No – Osprey primarily breed in trees, foraging up to 10 km from their nest in coastal waters, rivers and lochs where fish are abundant (Cornell University, 2026). Thus, no connectivity has been identified as the proposed development is outwith Osprey's breeding foraging range.
Conon Islands SAC (NatureScot, 2020d)	14.07 km NW (The site is comprised of multiple land parcels)	Alder woodland on floodplains	No – Distance from the proposed development means no connectivity was identified for the listed terrestrial habitat.
Cromarty Firth Ramsar site (NatureScot, 1999d)	14.58 km NW (The site is comprised of multiple land parcels)	- Estuarine alder woodland - Intertidal mudflats and sandflats - Mudflat - Open water transition fen - Saltmarsh	No – Distance from the proposed development means no connectivity was identified for the listed terrestrial and transitional habitats.

Designated Site	Distance (approximate) and Direction	Qualifying Feature(s)	Ecological Connectivity Identified
		Non-breeding • Bar-tailed godwit • Knot • Pintail • Red-breasted merganser • Scaup • Waterfowl assemblage • Wigeon	Yes – Considered within Cromarty Firth SPA, see Section 6.4.
		Non-breeding • Curlew • Dunlin • Greylag goose • Oystercatcher • Redshank • Whooper swan	No – The proposed development is outwith the foraging ranges of the wintering curlew (2 km), dunlin (3 km) and whooper swan (5 km) associated with the Dornoch Firth and Loch Fleet SPA (SNH (now NatureScot), 2016). Oystercatcher and redshank exhibit site-fidelity and are faithful to wintering sites year-on-year (Burton, 2000; Griffin <i>et al.</i>, 2023), occasionally venturing to a neighbouring site. Thus, due to the distance of the proposed development, oystercatcher and redshank associated with the Cromarty Firth Ramsar site will not be found near the development. The greylag goose winters in low-lying agricultural habitat, which is not found within the development boundary or immediate surrounding area (NatureScot, 2024a). As such, there is no connectivity identified for curlew, dunlin, whooper swan, oystercatcher, redshank or greylag goose.
		Breeding • Common tern	Yes – Considered within Cromarty Firth SPA, See Section 6.4.

Designated Site	Distance (approximate) and Direction	Qualifying Feature(s)	Ecological Connectivity Identified
		Breeding Osprey	No – Osprey primarily breed in trees, foraging up to 10 km from their nest in coastal waters, rivers and lochs where fish are abundant (Cornell University, 2026). As such, no connectivity has been identified as the proposed development is outwith Osprey's breeding foraging range.
Carn nan Tri-tighearnan SAC (NatureScot, 2020e)	14.89 km southeast (SE)	Blanket bog	No – Distance from the proposed development means no connectivity was identified for the listed terrestrial habitat.
Loch Flemington SPA (NatureScot, 1997b)	15.29 km northeast (NE)	Breeding Slavonian grebe	No – Slavonian grebe nest and forage in freshwater lochs during the breeding season (The Wildlife Trusts, 2026), so connectivity has been identified.
Cawdor Wood SAC (NatureScot, 2020f)	17.58 km E	Western acidic oak woodland	No – Distance from the proposed development means no connectivity was identified for the listed terrestrial habitat.
Loch Ussie SAC (NatureScot, 2020g)	18.53 km NW	Clear-water lakes or lochs with aquatic vegetation and poor to moderate nutrient levels	No – Distance from the proposed development means no connectivity was identified for the listed freshwater habitat.
Loch Ruthven SAC (NatureScot, 2020h)	18.07 km south (S)	Clear-water lakes or lochs with aquatic vegetation and poor to moderate nutrient levels	No – Distance from the proposed development means no connectivity was identified for the listed freshwater habitat.
		Otter (<i>Lutra lutra</i>)	No - The proposed works are outwith the Loch Ruthven SAC, though connectivity is provided by a tributary through the River

Designated Site	Distance (approximate) and Direction	Qualifying Feature(s)	Ecological Connectivity Identified
			Farigaig and into Loch Ness, which then flows into River Ness. This trip (approximately 40 km) is at the maximum range of the river otters' known foraging range, as the average trip does not exceed 20 km (NatureScot, 2024b). Though it is unlikely that a trip of this length would be undertaken. There is a known coastal otter population in the Beaully and Inverness Firths, with holts in proximity to the proposed development, so otter reported in proximity to the proposed works are anticipated to be from this population.
Loch Ruthven SPA (NatureScot, 1996a)	18.07 km S	Breeding Slavonian grebe	No – Slavonian grebe nest and forage in freshwater lochs during the breeding season, and so there is no connectivity identified.
Loch Ruthven Ramsar site (NatureScot, 1996b)	18.07 km S	- Bog orchid (<i>Hammarbya paludosa</i>) - Coralroot orchid (<i>Corallorhiza trifida</i>)	No – Distance from the proposed development means no connectivity was identified for the listed plants.
North Inverness Lochs SPA (NatureScot, 1997c)	20.85 km SW (The site is comprised of multiple land parcels)	Breeding Slavonian grebe	No – Slavonian grebe nest and forage in freshwater lochs during the breeding season (The Wildlife Trusts, 2026). So, there is no connectivity identified with the proposed development.
Novar SPA (NatureScot, 2005)	21.75 km NNW	Breeding Capercaillie (<i>Tetrao urogallus</i>)	No – Capercaillie are ground-nesting birds of forest and woodland habitats (British Trust for Ornithology (BTO), 2026). As such, they are highly unlikely to be present in the coastal habitat of the proposed development.

Designated Site	Distance (approximate) and Direction	Qualifying Feature(s)	Ecological Connectivity Identified
Ness Woods SAC (NatureScot, 2020i)	25.85 km SSW (The site is comprised of multiple land parcels)	• Otter	No – The proposed works are outwith the Ness Woods SAC, though connectivity is provided through Loch Ness, which then flows into River Ness; a trip of around 25 km. This trip is at the maximum range of the river otters known foraging range, as the average trip does not exceed 20 km (NatureScot, 2024b). It is unlikely that a trip of this length would be undertaken. There is a known coastal otter population in the Beaully and Inverness Firths, with holts in close proximity to the proposed development. So, otter reported in proximity to the proposed works are anticipated to be from this population.
		• Mixed woodland on base-rich soils associated with rocky slopes • Western acidic oak woodland	No – Distance from the proposed development means no connectivity was identified for the listed habitats.
Dornoch Firth and Loch Fleet SPA (NatureScot, 1997d)	27.46 km north-northeast (NNE) (The site is comprised of multiple land parcels)	Non-breeding • Bar-tailed godwit • Scaup • Teal • Wigeon • Waterfowl assemblage	Yes – See Section 6.5.
		Non-breeding • Curlew • Dunlin • Greylag goose • Oystercatcher • Redshank	No – The proposed development is outwith the foraging ranges of the wintering curlew (2 km) and dunlin (3 km) associating with the Dornoch Firth and Loch Fleet SPA (SNH (now NatureScot), 2016). Oystercatcher and redshank exhibit site-fidelity and are faithful to wintering sites year-on-year (Burton, 2000; Griffin <i>et al.</i>, 2023), occasionally venturing to a neighbouring site. Thus, due to the

Designated Site	Distance (approximate) and Direction	Qualifying Feature(s)	Ecological Connectivity Identified
			distance of the proposed development, oystercatcher and redshank associated with the Dornoch Firth and Loch Fleet SPA will not be found near the development. The greylag goose winters in low-lying agricultural habitat, which is not found within the development boundary or immediate surrounding area (NatureScot, 2024a). As such there is no connectivity identified for curlew, dunlin, oystercatcher, redshank or greylag goose.
Dornoch Firth and Loch Fleet Ramsar site (NatureScot, 1997e)	37.46 km NNE (The site is comprised of multiple land parcels)	• Dwarf eelgrass (<i>Zostera noltei</i>) • Eelgrass (<i>Zostera marina</i>) • Estuarine alder woodland • Estuary • Saltmarsh • Sand dune • Seaside centaury (<i>Centaureum littorale</i>) • Wet woodland	No – Distance from the proposed development means no connectivity was identified for the listed plant and habitats.
		• Harbour seal (<i>Phoca vitulina</i>)	Yes – Considered within Dornoch Firth and Morrich More SAC, see Section 6.6.
		• Otter	No – Coastal otters in Scotland typically have smaller home ranges than other populations, ranging between 2 to 10 km along the shoreline (Chanin, 2013). As such there is no connectivity with the proposed development as it is outwith the otter populations home range.

Designated Site	Distance (approximate) and Direction	Qualifying Feature(s)	Ecological Connectivity Identified
		Non-breeding • Bar-tailed godwit • Scaup • Teal • Waterfowl assemblage • Wigeon	Yes – Considered within Dornoch Firth and Loch Fleet SPA, see Section 6.5.
		• Curlew • Dunlin • Greylag goose • Oystercatcher • Redshank	No – The proposed development is outwith the foraging ranges of the wintering curlew (2 km) and dunlin (3 km) associating with the Dornoch Firth and Loch Fleet Ramsar site (SNH (now NatureScot), 2016). Oystercatcher and redshank exhibit site-fidelity and are faithful to wintering sites year-on-year, occasionally venturing to a neighbouring site (Burton, 2000; Griffin <i>et al.</i>, 2023). Thus, due to the distance of the proposed development, oystercatcher and redshank associated with the Dornoch Firth and Loch Fleet Ramsar site will not be found near the development. The greylag goose winters in low-lying agricultural habitat, which is not found within the development boundary or immediate surrounding area (NatureScot, 2024a). As such there is no connectivity identified for curlew, dunlin, oystercatcher, redshank or greylag goose.
		Breeding • Osprey	No – The proposed development is outwith the maximum foraging distance (28 km) recorded during the ospreys breeding season. As such there is no connectivity with the proposed development.

Designated Site	Distance (approximate) and Direction	Qualifying Feature(s)	Ecological Connectivity Identified
Dornoch Firth and Morrich More SAC (NatureScot, 2025c)	37.46 km NNE (The site is comprised of multiple land parcels)	• Atlantic salt meadows • Coastal dune heathland • Dune grassland • Dunes with juniper thickets • Estuaries • Glasswort and other annuals colonising mud and sand • Humid dune slacks • Intertidal mudflats and sandflats • Lime-deficient dune heathland with crowberry • Reefs • Shifting dunes • Shifting dunes with marram • Subtidal sandbanks	No – Distance from the proposed development means no connectivity was identified for the listed terrestrial habitats, transitional habitats, and marine habitats.
		• Harbour seal	Yes – See Section 6.6.
		• Otter	No – Coastal otters in Scotland typically have smaller home ranges than other populations, ranging between 2 and 10 km along the shoreline (Chanin, 2013). As such, there is no connectivity with the proposed development as it is outwith the otter population's home range.
River Moriston SAC (NatureScot, 2019)	38.10 km SW	• Atlantic salmon (<i>Salmo salar</i>)	Yes – See Section 6.7.
		• Freshwater pearl mussel (<i>Margaritifera margaritifera</i>)	Yes – See Section 6.7.

6 Consideration of Likely Significant Effects

As detailed in Table 5.1.1, seven designated sites have been found to have ecological connectivity to the proposed development. These have been brought forward for consideration of LSE within this section.

6.1 Moray Firth SAC

The Moray Firth SAC extends from Helmsdale to Lossiemouth, encompassing an area of 151273.98 hectares (ha). It is situated 190m north of the proposed development.

The Moray Firth SAC provides conservation benefits by affording protection to subtidal sand banks and to the resident bottlenose dolphins of the Moray Firth (NatureScot, 2025b). The conservation objectives for qualifying features of the Moray Firth SAC which are considered for LSE are shown in Table 6.1.1.

A degree of ecological connectivity has been identified between the Moray Firth SAC and the proposed development due to its qualifying feature, the bottlenose dolphin. No connectivity was found with the subtidal sandbanks associated with the SAC. Potential direct effects on bottlenose dolphin associated with the development are connected to disturbance, displacement, injury and collision. A summary of LSE considerations is provided in Table 6.1.2.

Table 6.1.1: Conservation Objectives of the Moray Firth SAC (NatureScot, 2025b)

Conservation Objectives of the Designated Site
1. To ensure that the qualifying features of Moray Firth SAC are in favourable condition and make an appropriate contribution to achieving Favourable Conservation Status. 2. To ensure that the integrity of Moray Firth SAC is maintained or restored in the context of environmental changes by meeting objectives 2a, 2b and 2c for each qualifying feature:
For bottlenose dolphin: 2a. The population of bottlenose dolphin is a viable component of the site. 2b. The distribution of bottlenose dolphin throughout the site is maintained by avoiding significant disturbance. 2c. The supporting habitats and processes relevant to bottlenose dolphin and the availability of prey for bottlenose dolphin are maintained.

Table 6.1.2: Moray Firth SAC Assessment of LSE

Qualifying Feature & Latest Assessed Condition (NatureScot, 2025b)	Assessment of LSE
Bottlenose dolphin [Favourable maintained]	Ecological connectivity to bottlenose dolphins within the SAC has been identified, as bottlenose dolphins are known to frequent South Kessock, near the proposed development. Piling will be used to construct the quayside. Without mitigation, piling poses a risk to bottlenose dolphins as exposure to high underwater noise levels could cause disturbance and/or injury. As such, individuals may avoid supporting habitats with increased noise levels from piling activity, restricting their ability to access prey resources. Vessel movements associated with the proposed development could cause disturbance or pose a risk of collision with bottlenose dolphins. However, vessel traffic associated with the construction and operation of the proposed development will not increase the overall vessel traffic in the area significantly.

Qualifying Feature & Latest Assessed Condition (NatureScot, 2025b)	Assessment of LSE
	Moreover, as the Moray Firth is an active shipping area, bottlenose dolphins are likely habituated to vessel traffic. Oils, fuels, and chemicals will be present on the construction site, and during operation of the proposed development, in the event of a loss of containment, there is a risk of water pollution. Though this is very unlikely to occur, such an incident could temporarily affect the quality of the supporting habitats, as bottlenose dolphins associated with the SAC may directly ingest these contaminants or ingest contaminated prey. The volume of contaminants present on the construction site and during operations is not anticipated to be large enough to cause mortality. Thus, the species viability as a component of the SAC is likely not to be affected. Similarly, in the operational phase of the development. As the conservation objectives of this species may be affected by piling works without mitigation, potential for LSE has been identified, and it is proposed that bottlenose dolphins will need to be scoped in for AA.

6.2 Moray Firth SPA

The Moray Firth SPA extends along the coast from Cnoc na Crioche, Caithness to Portsoy, Aberdeenshire, encompassing an area of 176218.12ha. It is situated 320m north of the proposed development.

The Moray Firth SPA provides conservation benefits through affording protection to 11 non-breeding bird species, and shag (breeding) in the Moray Firth (NatureScot, 2022b). The conservation objectives for the Moray Firth SPA are shown in Table 6.2.1.

A degree of ecological connectivity has been identified between the Moray Firth SPA and the proposed development due to its qualifying breeding and non-breeding bird species. Potential direct effects on breeding and non-breeding birds associated with the development are connected to disturbance and displacement. A summary of LSE considerations is provided in Table 6.2.2.

Table 6.2.1: Conservation Objectives of the Moray Firth SPA (NatureScot, 2022b)

Conservation Objectives of the Designated Site
1. To ensure that the qualifying features of the Moray Firth SPA are in favourable condition and make an appropriate contribution to achieving Favourable Conservation Status. 2. To ensure that the integrity of the Moray Firth SPA is restored in the context of environmental changes by meeting objectives 2a, 2b and 2c for each qualifying feature: 2a. The populations of qualifying features are viable components of the site. 2b. The distribution of the qualifying features is maintained throughout the site by avoiding significant disturbance of the species. 2c. The supporting habitats and processes relevant to qualifying features and their prey resources are maintained, or where appropriate restored, at the Moray Firth SPA.

Table 6.2.2: Moray Firth SPA Assessment of LSE

Qualifying Feature and Latest Assessed Condition (NatureScot, 2022b)	Assessment of LSE
Non-breeding • Common scoter [Favourable maintained] • Eider [Favourable declining] • Great northern diver [Favourable maintained] • Long-tailed duck [Favourable declining] • Red-breasted merganser [Favourable maintained] • Red-throated diver [Favourable maintained] • Scaup [Unfavourable declining] • Shag [Favourable maintained] • Slavonian grebe [Favourable maintained] • Velvet scoter [Unfavourable declining]	The proposed works are outwith the Moray Firth SPA. Nevertheless, hydrological connectivity between the River Ness and the Moray Firth means that qualifying species may be present in the vicinity of the development during the non-breeding season (October–March inclusive). However, wintering bird surveys commissioned by POI did not record any of these species in the River Ness adjacent to the proposed development (Affric, 2026b). There will be no change to existing navigation routes through the Moray Firth SPA, and it is noted that the proposed development is located adjacent to one of the Port’s main commercial quays where between 160-200 vessel movements pass every year.; however, there will be a minor increase in the number of vessels travelling between the canal and the barge berth. Thus, individuals present near the barge berth may be disturbed and/or displaced by vessel movements during the construction and operational phases. Given the absence of qualifying species near the proposed development and the limited increase in vessel activity, any disturbance is expected to be temporary and highly localised. In the context of the survey findings, the potential for disturbance to qualifying SPA species is therefore considered to be low. In-air noise, artificial lighting, and construction traffic may cause disturbance. However, given the small scale and temporary nature of the construction works, disturbance is anticipated to be highly localised. During the operational phase, disturbance associated with in-air noise and lighting associated vessel loading will remain confined to the immediate vicinity of the barge berth. Consequently, it is considered highly unlikely that the proposed development will result in disturbance that would undermine the conservation objectives of the Moray Firth SPA. Specifically, there will be no adverse effect on the distribution, abundance or viability of the qualifying bird populations, nor on the extent, distribution, structure or function of their supporting habitats. As discussed in Table 6.1.2, pollution incidents are unlikely and, if they were to occur, would be relatively small and so are not anticipated to cause an LSE on the conservation objectives. As such, it is proposed that the listed non-breeding bird species are scoped out for AA, as no LSE has been identified on their conservation objectives.
Non-breeding • Goldeneye [Unfavourable declining]	The proposed works are outwith the Moray Firth SPA though there is hydrological connectivity from the River Ness to the Moray Firth. This means that goldeneye using the SPA may be present within the locality of the development during the non-breeding season (October–March inclusive). As noted in wintering bird survey data from the POI (Affric, 2026b), goldeneye frequent the River Ness near the proposed development during the non-breeding season. Construction and operational phases may give rise to disturbance, in the form of in-air noise, lighting, and vessel movements around the berth. Hence, individual goldeneye that may be associated with

Qualifying Feature and Latest Assessed Condition (NatureScot, 2022b)	Assessment of LSE
	the Moray Firth SPA could be disturbed by construction and operations in the River Ness. However, this is highly unlikely to give rise to a population level effect, and will not affect the distribution within the SPA. As discussed in Table 6.1.2, pollution incidents are unlikely and, if they were to occur, would be relatively small. However, goldeneye could be present in the immediate vicinity of the berth; hence, potential pollution incidents such as spills could affect them directly which could have short-term effects on the population. As the conservation objectives of goldeneye may be affected by works in the absence of mitigation, potential for LSE has been identified. So, it is proposed that goldeneye associated with the Moray Firth SPA will be scoped in for AA, with specific regard to pollution incidents.
Breeding • Shag [Favourable maintained]	The proposed works are outwith the Moray Firth SPA, although there is hydrological connectivity from the River Ness to the Moray Firth. As shag primarily breed in colonies on rocky cliffs, it is not expected that this species will have a nest within 1 km of the proposed development. Shag in Scotland travel within 40 km from their nest sites to feed on rocky shores (Dehnhard <i>et al.</i>, 2022). As the area immediately surrounding the proposed development is not the shags preferred habitat, it is unlikely any individuals will be disturbed during the construction and operation of the proposed development. As such, it is proposed that breeding shag are scoped out for AA, as no LSE has been identified on their conservation objectives.

6.3 Inner Moray Firth SPA

The Inner Moray Firth SPA extends from the mouth of the River Beauly to the intertidal waters of the Beauly Firth, and from Munlochy Bay to Nairn, and covers an area of 2290.25ha. At the closest Point, the Inner Moray Firth SPA sits 2.4km southeast of the proposed development.

The Inner Moray Firth SPA provides conservation benefits through affording protection to 12 non-breeding bird species, two breeding bird species, and waterfowl assemblage in the Inner Moray Firth (NatureScot, 1999a). The conservation objectives for the Inner Moray Firth SPA are shown in Table 6.3.1.

A degree of ecological connectivity has been identified between the Inner Moray Firth SPA and the proposed development due to its qualifying breeding and non-breeding bird species. Potential direct effects on the breeding and non-breeding birds associated with the development are connected to disturbance and displacement. A summary of LSE considerations is provided in Table 6.3.2.

Table 6.3.1: Conservation Objectives of the Inner Moray Firth SPA (NatureScot, 1999a)

Conservation Objectives of the Designated Site
To avoid deterioration of the habitats of the qualifying species (listed below) or significant disturbance to the qualifying species, thus ensuring that the integrity of the site is maintained; and To ensure for the qualifying species that the following are maintained in the long term: • Population of the species as a viable component of the site; • Distribution of the species within site; • Distribution and extent of habitats supporting the species; • Structure, function and supporting processes of habitats supporting the species; and • No significant disturbance of the species.

Table 6.3.2: Inner Moray Firth SPA Assessment of LSE

Qualifying Feature and Latest Assessed Condition (NatureScot, 1999a)	Assessment of LSE
Non-breeding • Bar-tailed godwit [Favourable maintained] • Curlew [Favourable maintained] • Greylag goose [Favourable maintained] • Oystercatcher [Favourable maintained] • Red-breasted merganser [Unfavourable, no change] • Redshank [Favourable maintained] • Scaup [Favourable maintained] • Teal [Favourable maintained] • Waterfowl assemblage [Favourable maintained] • Wigeon [Favourable maintained]	The proposed works are outwith the Inner Moray Firth SPA. Nevertheless, connectivity between the River Ness and the Moray Firth means that qualifying species may be present in the vicinity of the development during the non-breeding season (October–March inclusive). However, wintering bird surveys commissioned by POI did not record any of these species in the River Ness adjacent to the proposed development (Affric, 2026b). Given the distance between the development and the SPA, together with the small scale and temporary nature of the construction and operational works, it is anticipated that any impacts of the proposed development will be minimal and highly localised. As such, the works are not likely to affect the distribution, abundance, or viability of the listed bird populations, nor the extent or function of their supporting habitats. As discussed in Table 6.1.2, pollution incidents are unlikely and, if they were to occur, would be relatively small and so are not anticipated to cause an LSE on the conservation objectives. As such, it is proposed that the listed non-breeding bird species are scoped out for AA, as no LSE has been identified on their conservation objectives.
Non-breeding • Cormorant [Unfavourable, no change] • Goldeneye [Favourable maintained] • Goosander [Unfavourable, no change]	The proposed works are outwith the Inner Moray Firth SPA, although there is hydrological connectivity from the River Ness to the Moray Firth. So, non-breeding birds which use the SPA may be present within the locality of the development site during the non-breeding season (October–March inclusive). As noted in wintering bird survey data from the POI (Affric, 2026b), goldeneye, goosander and cormorant frequent the River Ness during the non-breeding season. Construction and operational phases may give rise to disturbance, in the form of in-air noise, lighting, and vessel movements around the berth. Hence, individual goldeneye, goosander and cormorant that may be associated with the Moray Firth SPA could be disturbed by construction and operations in the River Ness. As discussed in Table 6.1.2, pollution incidents are unlikely and if they were to occur would be relatively small. However, goldeneye,

Qualifying Feature and Latest Assessed Condition (NatureScot, 1999a)	Assessment of LSE
	cormorant, and goosander could be present in the immediate vicinity of the berth; and so, potential pollution incidents, such as spills, could affect them directly. As the conservation objectives of goldeneye, goosander and cormorant may be affected by works in the absence of mitigation, potential for LSE has been identified. So, it is proposed that non-breeding goldeneye, goosander and cormorant associated with the Inner Moray Firth SPA will be scoped in for AA.
Breeding • Common tern [Unfavourable, no change] • Osprey ([Favourable maintained])	The proposed works are outwith the Inner Moray Firth SPA, though there is hydrological connectivity from the River Ness through the Moray Firth. Osprey primarily breed in trees, foraging up to 10 km from their nest in undisturbed coastal waters, rivers and lochs where fish are abundant (Cornell University, 2026). Common terns typically nest on undisturbed shingle and sandy beaches and forage in estuarine habitats up to 30 km from their nests (Woodward <i>et al.</i>, 2019). Therefore, neither species is expected to nest within the immediate locality of the proposed development. As discussed in Table 6.1.2, pollution incidents are unlikely and, if they were to occur, would be relatively small and so are not anticipated to cause an LSE on the conservation objectives. Due to the disturbed nature of the area surrounding the port and the distance from the SPA, it is highly unlikely that osprey or common tern would utilise the waters immediately surrounding the proposed development for foraging. Thus, no LSE has been identified on their conservation objectives. As such, it is proposed that breeding osprey and common tern have been scoped out for AA.

6.4 Cromarty Firth SPA

The Cromarty Firth SPA covers the intertidal and estuarine habitat in the Cromarty Firth, with an area of 3247.96ha. It is situated 14.06km northwest of the proposed development.

The Cromarty Firth SPA provides conservation benefits through affording protection to 12 non-breeding bird species, waterfowl assemblage, and two breeding bird species (NatureScot, 1999c). The conservation objectives for the Cromarty Firth SPA are shown in Table 6.4.1.

A degree of ecological connectivity has been identified between the Cromarty Firth SPA and the proposed development due to 12 of its qualifying features. Curlew, dunlin, whooper swan, greylag goose, oystercatcher, redshank and osprey were identified as not having connectivity with the proposed development and so have not been considered further. Potential direct effects on breeding and non-breeding birds associated with the development are connected to disturbance and displacement. A summary of LSE considerations is provided in Table 6.4.2. The Cromarty Firth Ramsar site qualifying features with connectivity to the proposed development are also considered within the Cromarty Firth SPA assessment of LSE.

Table 6.4.1: Conservation Objectives of the Cromarty Firth SPA (NatureScot, 1999c)

Conservation Objectives of the Designated Site
To avoid deterioration of the habitats of the qualifying species (listed below) or significant disturbance to the qualifying species, thus ensuring that the integrity of the site is maintained; and To ensure for the qualifying species that the following are maintained in the long term: • Population of the species as a viable component of the site; • Distribution of the species within site; • Distribution and extent of habitats supporting the species; • Structure, function and supporting processes of habitats supporting the species; and • No significant disturbance of the species.

Table 6.4.2: Cromarty Firth SPA Assessment of LSE

Qualifying Feature and Latest Assessed Condition (NatureScot, 1999c)	Assessment of LSE
Non-breeding • Bar-tailed godwit [Favourable maintained] • Knot [Favourable maintained] • Pintail [Favourable maintained] • Red-breasted merganser [Favourable maintained] • Scaup [Unfavourable, no change] • Waterfowl assemblage [Favourable maintained] • Wigeon [Favourable maintained]	The proposed works are located outwith the Cromarty Firth SPA, though there is a degree of hydrological and ecological connectivity to the SPA through the Moray Firth. The listed species prefer estuarine and marine habitats during the non-breeding season. As the impacts of the construction and operation of the proposed development are expected to be highly localised and minimal to the river, it is unlikely that the conservation objectives of the SPA will be undermined. In particular, there will be no effects on the distribution, abundance, or viability of non-breeding bird populations, nor on the extent or function of their supporting habitats. As discussed in Table 6.1.2, pollution incidents are unlikely and, if they were to occur, would be relatively small and so are not anticipated to cause an LSE on the conservation objectives. Accordingly, no LSE has been identified on the conservation objectives of any of the listed non-breeding birds associated with the Cromarty Firth SPA. So, it is proposed that they are scoped out for AA.
Breeding • Common tern [Unfavourable declining]	The proposed works are outwith the Cromarty Firth SPA, though connectivity has been identified as tern may forage in estuarine habitats up to 30 km from their nests (Woodward <i>et al.</i>, 2019). However, tern typically nest on undisturbed shingle and sandy beaches. Therefore, tern are not expected to nest within the immediate locality of the proposed development. As discussed in Table 6.1.2, pollution incidents are unlikely and, if they were to occur, would be relatively small and so are not anticipated to cause an LSE on the conservation objectives. Due to the disturbed nature of the area surrounding the port and the distance from the SPA, it is highly unlikely that common tern would utilise the waters immediately surrounding the proposed development for foraging. Thus, no LSE has been identified on their conservation objectives. As such, it is proposed that breeding common tern have been scoped out for AA.

6.5 Dornoch Firth and Loch Fleet SPA

The Dornoch Firth and Loch Fleet SPA covers the two estuaries, Dornoch Firth and Loch Fleet, with an area of 6513.27ha. It is situated 29.5km north-northeast of the proposed development.

The Dornoch Firth and Loch Fleet SPA provides conservation benefits through affording protection to nine wintering bird species and waterfowl assemblage (NatureScot, 1997d). The bird species with connectivity identified that are qualifying features of the Dornoch Firth and Loch Fleet Ramsar site are considered within the Dornoch Firth and Loch Fleet SPA. The conservation objectives of the qualifying features of the Dornoch Firth and Loch Fleet SPA which are considered for LSE are shown in Table 6.5.1.

A degree of ecological connectivity has been identified between the Dornoch Firth and Loch Fleet SPA and the proposed development due to four wintering bird species and waterfowl assemblage. Five species have not been considered further as no connectivity was identified with the proposed development. These species are curlew, dunlin, greylag goose, oystercatcher, and redshank. Potential direct effects on the remaining qualifying features associated with the development are connected to disturbance and displacement. A summary of LSE considerations is provided in Table 6.5.2.

Table 6.5.1: Conservation Objectives of the Dornoch Firth and Loch Fleet SPA (NatureScot, 1997d)

Conservation Objectives of the Designated Site
To avoid deterioration of the habitats of the qualifying species (listed below) or significant disturbance to the qualifying species, thus ensuring that the integrity of the site is maintained; and To ensure for the qualifying species that the following are maintained in the long term: • Population of the species as a viable component of the site; • Distribution of the species within site; • Distribution and extent of habitats supporting the species; • Structure, function and supporting processes of habitats supporting the species; and • No significant disturbance of the species.

Table 6.5.2: Dornoch Firth and Loch Fleet SPA Assessment of LSE

Qualifying Feature and Latest Assessed Condition (NatureScot, 1997d)	Assessment of LSE
Non-breeding • Bar-tailed godwit [Favourable maintained] • Scaup [Favourable maintained] • Teal [Favourable maintained] • Wigeon [Favourable maintained] • Waterfowl assemblage [Favourable maintained]	The proposed works are located outwith the Dornoch Firth and Loch Fleet SPA, though there is a degree of hydrological and ecological connectivity to the SPA through the Moray Firth. The listed species prefer estuarine and marine habitats during the non-breeding season. As the impacts of the construction and operation of the proposed development are expected to be highly localised, it is unlikely that the conservation objectives of the SPA will be undermined. In particular, there will be no effects on the distribution, abundance, or viability of non-breeding bird populations, nor on the extent or function of their supporting habitats. As discussed in Table 6.1.2, pollution incidents are unlikely and, if they were to occur, would be relatively small and so are not anticipated to cause an LSE on the conservation objectives. As such, it is proposed that the listed non-breeding bird species have been scoped out for AA, as no LSE has been identified on their conservation objectives.

6.6 Dornoch Firth and Morrich More SAC

The Dornoch Firth and Morrich More SAC covers the Dornoch Firth from Bonar Bridge, with an area of 8701.22ha. It is situated 37.46km north-northeast of the proposed development.

The Dornoch Firth and Morrich More SAC provides conservation benefits through affording protection to estuarine and intertidal habitat and to the harbour seal and otter associated with the Dornoch Firth. These species with connectivity identified are also qualifying features of the Dornoch Firth and Loch Fleet Ramsar site. The relevant conservation objectives of qualifying species considered in the Dornoch Firth and Morrich More SAC are shown in Table 6.6.1.

A degree of ecological connectivity has been identified between the Dornoch Firth and Morrich More SAC and the proposed development due to its qualifying species, harbour seal. Thirteen habitats and otter protected as qualifying features of the Dornoch Firth and Morrich More SAC are not considered further as no connectivity was identified with the proposed development. Potential direct effects on harbour seal associated with the development are connected to disturbance and displacement. A summary of LSE considerations are provided in Table 6.6.2.

Table 6.6.1: Conservation Objectives of the Dornoch Firth and Morrich More SAC

Conservation Objectives of the Designated Site	
1.	To ensure that the qualifying features of Dornoch Firth and Morrich More SAC are in favourable condition and make an appropriate contribution to achieving Favourable Conservation Status.
2.	To ensure that the integrity of Dornoch Firth and Morrich More SAC is restored in the context of environmental changes by meeting objectives 2a, 2b and 2c for each qualifying feature:
2a.	Harbour seals and otters are viable components of the Dornoch Firth and Morrich More SAC.
2b.	The distribution of harbour seals and otters throughout the site is maintained by avoiding significant disturbance.
2c.	The supporting habitats and processes relevant to harbour seal and otter are maintained, including prey resources for otter.

Table 6.6.2: Dornoch Firth and Morrich More SAC Assessment of LSE

Qualifying Feature and Latest Assessed Condition (NatureScot, 2025c)	Assessment of LSE
Harbour seal [Unfavourable declining]	The proposed works are outwith the Dornoch Firth and Morrich More SAC, though harbour seals are occasionally sighted in the Beaully Firth outwith the River Ness (NBN Atlas, 2026). By water, the proposed development is 65 km from the SAC. As harbour seals associated with this SAC have a typical foraging range of 40-50 km from their haul-out site (NatureScot, 2025c), the distance of the designated site from the proposed works exceeds their known range. As such, the individuals sighted in the Beaully Firth are likely associated with the Brora designated haul-out site, located in the Firth, not the SAC. Thus, it is unlikely that the SAC's conservation objectives will be undermined. In particular, there will be no effects on the distribution, abundance, or viability of the harbour seal population, nor on the extent or function of their supporting habitats. As discussed in Table 6.1.2, pollution incidents are unlikely and, if they were to occur, would be relatively small and so are not anticipated to cause an LSE on the conservation objectives.

Qualifying Feature and Latest Assessed Condition (NatureScot, 2025c)	Assessment of LSE
	In consideration of the Brora designated seal haul-out, and the distance of the proposed development from the SAC, no LSE has been identified for the conservation objectives of harbour seals associated with the SAC. Therefore, it is proposed that harbour seal associated with the SAC are scoped out of AA.

6.7 River Moriston SAC

The River Moriston SAC extends along the River Moriston from Loch Cluanie to Loch Ness, covering an area of 194.38ha. It is situated 38.55km southwest of the proposed development.

The River Moriston SAC provides conservation benefits through affording protection to freshwater mussel pearl and Atlantic salmon associated with the River Moriston (NatureScot, 2019). The conservation objectives for the River Moriston SAC are shown in Table 6.7.1.

A degree of ecological connectivity has been identified between the River Moriston SAC and the proposed development due to its qualifying features, freshwater pearl mussel and Atlantic salmon. Salmon migrating to and from the River Moriston will pass by the proposed development. There is therefore connectivity between the proposed development and Atlantic salmon associated with this SAC. A summary of LSE considerations is provided in Table 6.7.2.

Table 6.7.1: Conservation Objectives of the River Moriston SAC (NatureScot, 2019)

Conservation Objectives of the Designated Site
- To ensure that the qualifying features of the River Moriston SAC are in favourable condition and make an appropriate contribution to achieving favourable conservation status. - To ensure that the integrity of the River Moriston SAC is restored by meeting objectives 2a, 2b, 2c for each qualifying feature (and 2d for freshwater pearl mussel).
For: Atlantic Salmon 2a. Restore the population of Atlantic salmon, including range of genetic types, as a viable component of the site. 2b. Restore the distribution of Atlantic salmon throughout the site. 2c. Restore the habitats supporting Atlantic salmon within the site and availability of food.
For: Freshwater pearl mussel 2a. Restore the population of freshwater pearl mussel as a viable component of the site. 2b. Restore the distribution of freshwater pearl mussel throughout the site. 2c. Restore the habitats supporting the freshwater pearl mussel within the site and availability of food. 2d. Restore the distribution and viability of freshwater pearl mussel host species and their supporting habitats.

Table 6.7.2: River Moriston SAC Assessment of LSE

Qualifying Feature and Latest Assessed Condition (NatureScot, 2019)	Assessment of LSE
Atlantic salmon [Unfavourable, no change]	The proposed works are outwith the River Moriston SAC, though connectivity to the proposed works has been identified for Atlantic salmon through the Moray Firth, River Ness, and Loch Ness. Atlantic salmon are diadromous fishes; they return to the same river to spawn (Godfrey <i>et al.</i> , 2014). Adults migrate upriver to spawning grounds between

Qualifying Feature and Latest Assessed Condition (NatureScot, 2019)	Assessment of LSE
	September and December (Cromarty Firth Fisheries, 2008; Malcolm <i>et al.</i>, 2010). Young salmon smolts will then migrate to sea between April and May (Beaully Fishery Board, 2022). As such, Atlantic salmon migrating from and returning to the River Moriston must pass the proposed development in the River Ness. Pile installation may cause temporary underwater noise disturbance. It is not anticipated that noise levels arising from piling will be excessive, with vibratory piling preferred over percussion wherever practicable. There are a small number of piles to be installed, hence the duration of disturbance will be short-lived. An underwater noise assessment will be undertaken to ascertain potential impacts to salmon, with mitigation developed if required. As discussed in Table 6.1.2, pollution incidents are unlikely and, if they were to occur, would be relatively small. However, if it were to occur during the smolt run or when salmon are returning to spawn, then salmon could be present in the immediate vicinity of the berth; hence, potential pollution incidents such as spills could affect them directly which could have short-term effects on the population. As it cannot be ruled out on the basis of objective information, potential for LSE has been identified, and Atlantic salmon associated with the River Moriston SAC will be scoped in for AA.
Freshwater pearl mussel [Unfavourable, no change]	The proposed works are outwith the River Moriston SAC, though connectivity to the proposed works has been identified for freshwater pearl mussel through Loch Ness and the River Ness. Freshwater pearl mussel larvae attach to the gills of juvenile salmonids, thus successful recruitment is reliant on the integrity of the salmonid population (Taeubert and Geist, 2017). Therefore, effects on salmonids could result in indirect effects on freshwater pearl mussel. As the conservation objectives of Atlantic salmon may be affected by works without mitigation, the potential for LSE has been identified on the conservation objectives of freshwater pearl mussel. Thus, freshwater pearl mussel associated with the River Moriston SAC will be scoped in for AA.

6.8 In-combination Effects

To assess the in-combination effects of the proposed development and other projects and plans, a search was undertaken on The Highland Council's (THC) Planning Application Portal (THC, 2026) and Marine Directorate's Licence Application Portal (Marine Directorate, 2026b). The search was conducted using a 5 km boundary for projects in the marine environment, and 0.5 km for projects in the terrestrial environment; these boundaries were deemed proportionate and appropriate due to the urban setting, the temporary and limited impacts of the proposed development and hydrological connectivity. The search did not identify any proposed projects or plans that are anticipated to result in LSE of the conservation objectives of any European or Ramsar sites.

7 Summary

After consideration of the proposed works and the anticipated risks to qualifying interests associated with European sites, LSE were identified for:

- Bottlenose dolphins associated with the Moray Firth SAC;
- Non-breeding goldeneye associated with the Moray Firth SPA;
- Non-breeding cormorant, goldeneye and goosander associated with the Inner Moray Firth SPA; and
- Freshwater pearl mussel and Atlantic salmon associated with the River Moriston SAC.

It is proposed that these features are likely to require AA and hence, sufficient information will be provided with the consent applications in an HRA supporting document to allow the AA to be completed. Advice is requested from the consenting authorities and their consultees that the above conclusions are proportionate and appropriate for the proposed development, and whether any other European sites and/or their qualifying features should be considered.

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9 Glossary

Acronym	Definition
AA	Appropriate Assessment
BTO	British Trust for Ornithology
CD	Chart Datum
cSAC	Candidate Special Area of Conservation
E	East
EIA	Environmental Impact Assessment
ha	Hectares
HGV	Heavy Goods Vehicles
HRA	Habitats Regulations Assessment
IHT	Inverness Harbour Trust
IROPI	Imperative Reasons of Overriding Public Interest
LSE	Likely Significant Effect
MHWS	Mean High Water Springs
NBN	National Biodiversity Network
N	North
NE	Northeast
NNE	North-northeast
NNW	North-northwest
NGR	National Grid Reference
NMPi	National Marine Plan interactive
NW	Northwest
OD	Ordnance Datum
POI	Port of Inverness
pSAC	Proposed Special Area of Conservation
pSPA	Proposed Special Protection Area
S	South
SAC	Special Area of Conservation
SE	Southeast
SEPA	Scottish Environment Protection Agency
SNH	Scottish Natural Heritage
SPA	Special Protection Area
SSSI	Site of Special Scientific Interest
SSW	South-southwest
SW	Southwest
THC	The Highland Council
W	West

Drawings

Drawing Reference	Drawing Title
139_DRG_08_01	Barge Berth Location Plan.
2021-221	Proposed Barge and Bridge Site Location.
2021-222	Proposed Barge and Bridge Plan and Elevations.
139_DRG_07_1	European and Ramsar Sites