

Our ref: P23-392 Pencoed Ganol Ornithology.docx

21 January 2025

Steffan Baker
Associate
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By email

Dear Steffan

Re: Pencoed Ganol Solar Farm Ornithology

The enclosed letter provides a preliminary evaluation of whether land at Pencoed Ganol is likely to be functionally linked to the Burry Inlet Special Protection Area (SPA) and Ramsar Site.

1. Site Description and Context

The proposed Pencoed Ganol solar site (the 'Site') is characterised by cattle-grazed improved grassland. It contains twenty fields. These are principally demarcated by field boundary hedgerows and connected by tracks and gates. The Site is lowland in nature and gradually rises from east to west.

The Site is approximately 1.9 km to the north of the Burry Inlet SPA and Ramsar Site. The SPA is classified for supporting an assemblage of over 34,000 birds, and for its importance to non-breeding (wintering) populations of northern pintail *Anas acuta*, northern shoveler *Anas clypeata*, Eurasian teal *Anas crecca*, Eurasian wigeon *Anas penelope*, dunlin *Calidris alpina alpina*, Eurasian oystercatcher *Haematopus ostralegus*, Eurasian curlew *Numenius arquata*, grey plover *Pluvialis squatarola*, common redshank *Tringa totanus* and common shelduck *Tadorna tadorna*. The Ramsar Site does not add further ornithological interest features to the SPA designation.

Land extending to within approximately 260 m of the eastern Site boundary is notified a Site of Special Scientific Interest (Burry Inlet and Loughor Estuary SSSI), which extends outside of the SPA to take in an area of the River Loughor, which feeds into the Burry Inlet. Riverine sand and mud and adjoining areas of grazing marsh along the Loughor are likely to support many of the species found in the SPA.

2. Functional Linkage

Functional linkage can be defined as follows (Chapman & Tyldesley, 2016¹):

'Functional linkage' refers to the role or 'function' that land (or sea) beyond the boundary of a European site might fulfil in terms of ecologically supporting the populations for which the site was designated or classified. Such land is therefore 'linked' to the European site in question because it provides an important role in maintaining or restoring the population of qualifying species at favourable conservation status.

¹ 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 - a review of authoritative decisions. Natural England Commissioned Reports, Number 207.

3. Baseline Survey

To determine whether there is functional linkage between the Burry Inlet SPA and Ramsar Site and the Site, the following approach has been / is being taken:

- A request for biological records for the Site (and areas around it) has been made to West Wales Biodiversity Information Centre (WWBIC).
- Twice-monthly diurnal walkover surveys are being completed of the whole Site. These commenced in October 2024 and will conclude in April 2025.
- Once-monthly nocturnal walkover surveys using thermal imaging equipment are being completed. These also commenced in October 2024 and will conclude in April 2025.

The surveys are timed to coincide with high tide on the Burry Inlet and take account of different tidal heights (both neap and spring tides). The survey design accounts for the possibility that in the absence of regular use of the Site by waterfowl associated with the Burry Inlet, there is occasional use when tides that are high in the cycle result in regular upper shore roosting areas becoming unavailable.

In addition to the above, BSG Ecology completed walkover breeding bird survey work during 2024. Six visits, five of which commenced in the early morning and one in the evening, were completed. This work, while not directly relevant to the winter, provided useful context on the range of bird species typically using the Site.

4. Results

The survey work to date (October to December inclusive: six diurnal walkovers and three nocturnal walkovers) has found that the Site predominantly supports common passerines that occur widely in lowland farmland outside the breeding season. These include skylark *Alauda arvensis* and meadow pipit *Anthus pratensis*. A range of ubiquitous passerine species also occur, as well as common and widespread raptors.

Waterfowl are limited to little egret *Egretta garzetta* which use the site regularly diurnally for foraging (the peak to date has been ten birds during a diurnal survey in December), snipe *Gallinago gallinago*, woodcock *Scolopax rusticola* and lapwing *Vanellus vanellus*. Snipe use the Site diurnally (peak of 18 in December²) and nocturnally (peak of 24 in November), with the higher monthly counts being at night. Woodcock are more strictly nocturnal in their use of the Site; five to 13 birds have been recorded during nocturnal work, and only one (roosting) bird diurnally. Small numbers (one to six) lapwing have also been recorded during the nocturnal survey work. Records of species for which the SPA was classified are limited to a group of six teal noted feeding on a water body immediately south of the Site boundary during the second diurnal visit in December.

The Site has a very high level of use by red fox *Vulpes vulpes* at night, with up to three animals noted regularly using fields during the work.

There were no records from the desk study or breeding season survey to suggest waterfowl associated with the Burry Inlet are known to have used the Site in the past or use it during passage periods respectively.

5. Likelihood of Functional Linkage

Non-breeding (wintering) bird surveys to date have found very little to suggest the Site is important in terms of bird populations associated with the Burry Inlet SPA and Ramsar Site. It is considered very unlikely that the results of further survey work completed during January to April 2025 inclusive will significantly alter this emerging picture.

² Snipe and woodcock both flush on approach. It is therefore likely there has been some double counting of individuals.

The reasons for this are as follows:

- Some of the duck species for which the SPA and Ramsar Site are designated (such as pintail and wigeon) will roost on the open water when displaced from saltmarsh or mudflat by the rising tide and feed within the estuary complex for the duration of their annual presence.
- In general, for other waterbirds for which the SPA and Ramsar Site is designated, refuge areas such as islands and saltmarsh are available for roosting on most high tides, and during the highest spring tides there are still embanked areas and reserves (such as the grazing marsh and pools at WWT Llanelli which they habitually use) available to them. These areas are closer to the estuary than open farmland such as that at Pencoed Ganol. These other sites may also have lower levels of fox use / fox control in place. There is therefore no reason for other estuarine waterbirds to use the Site, and they have not been recorded doing so.
- Various SPA and non-SPA duck species may use the pool to the south of the Site boundary on occasion. However the small size, enclosed nature, irregular shape and apparent depth (there are no shallows) of this pool make it suboptimal for dabbling duck and incapable of supporting large numbers of any waterfowl. It is not considered an important resource to SPA populations for this reason. There are no other waterbodies on Site with the potential to support significant numbers of ducks.

Lapwing and little egret could be considered part of the assemblage qualification of the SPA and Ramsar Site, but both are present in such low numbers that a significant impact on the assemblage is highly unlikely (alone or in-combination with other proposals). Woodcock and snipe occur throughout lowland Carmarthenshire and neighbouring counties in winter, predominantly roosting during the day in woodland and marshy ground / reedbed respectively; these species are not associated with the SPA or Ramsar Site.

It is therefore concluded that there is no clear functional linkage between the Site and the SPA and no reason to suggest this picture will change.

Yours sincerely

Owain Gabb

Director

For and on behalf of BSG Ecology