

Preliminary Ecological Appraisal

As a part of any planning application Local Planning Authorities require, as a minimum, a Preliminary Ecological Appraisal (PEA) of a site to be submitted as part of the application. Preliminary ecological appraisals have various other names, including preliminary ecological surveys, extended Phase 1 habitat survey, Phase 1 surveys or even just ecological surveys. However, in essence they all require the same level of input. The chartered Institute of Ecological and Environmental Management (CIEEM) has published guidelines (CIEEM 2017 Guidelines for Preliminary Ecological Appraisal) in order to standardise the approach to a PEA.



When should a PEA be undertaken

A PEA should be undertaken as soon as possible in the planning process as recommendations for further time critical surveys or the need for key features to be retained and designed into any proposed development may result in delays to the submission of any planning application. In some cases it may be prudent to undertake a PEA when considering the purchase of a site, its allocation within any local development plans. A PEA can also be used as part of baseline data to inform any Local Planning Authorities screening opinion for projects which may require an Environmental Impact Assessment (EIA) or Habitats Regulations Assessment (HRA).

A PEA can be undertaken at any time of the year but to avoid any delays to a planning submission they are best undertaken at the beginning of the year. This then allows any further protected species survey work which may be required to be undertaken in the preceding species survey season, typically considered to be March to October.



55 WELL STREET, RUTHIN, DENBIGHSHIRE LL15 1AF
email: rml@rmlconsult.com web: www.rmlconsult.com
Tel +44(0)1824 704366
Registered in England No. 1848683 VAT Reg. No. 401 4243 13



PEA methodology

Typically, a PEA will involve a desk study and walkover of the site. This is then followed by an assessment of likely impacts of any proposed development on any ecological features identified as well as recommendations for further survey work, retention of habitats and potential enhancement measures.

Generally a desk study will involve the gathering of details of statutory nature conservation designations within 2 km of the site, e.g. Special Protection Areas (SPAs), Special Areas of Conservation (SACs), Ramsar etc.. In addition, records of protected species from local biological record centres or local interest groups (badger groups, ornithological societies etc.) are also contacted and asked to provide records of non-statutory nature conservation designations and records of any legally protected species within 2 km of the site.

A review of Ordnance Survey maps and aerial images is also undertaken to identify the presence of waterbodies within proximity to the site and areas of connected habitat which may be affected by any proposed development.

Following the deskstudy a walkover of the sites, also commonly referred to as extended Phase 1 habitat survey is undertaken. A Phase 1 habitat survey is a standardised method of recording habitat types and characteristic vegetation, as set out in the Handbook for Phase 1 Habitat Survey – a technique for Environmental Audit (JNCC, 2010). The Phase 1 survey method is ‘extended’ through the additional recording of specific features indicating the presence, or likely presence, of protected species or other species of nature conservation significance.

Next steps

Where the PEA has identified limited ecological impacts or is able to recommend sufficient avoidance, mitigation or enhancement measures based in the data collected, no further survey work or assessment may be required.

However, in cases where further surveys and assessment are required then a more detailed Ecological Impacts Assessment is likely to be needed. A planning application can only be submitted once this additional survey work and assessment has been completed.



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