

Requirement for ecological surveys for woodland creation: advice for those developing proposals

How do I know when an ecological survey is required?

We are receiving increasing requests for opinion on whether ecological surveys (e.g. peat, vegetation or breeding birds) are needed for small, non-WCPG¹ sites. We have tried to help with these as an interim measure, but do not have the capacity to respond to them on an ongoing basis. Also, because it is difficult to make a robust assessment from purely desk-based information, our advice has to err on the side of caution, which may cause delay in progressing what might be low impact schemes through the system.

Our Area Ecologist's role is mostly focused on WCPG schemes, which enable the applicant to claim a percentage of the costs of any necessary surveys; thus, WCPG is the recommended way of assessing and designing woodland proposals (where eligible).

Outside WCPG schemes, the lead organisation (for example, Community Forest, local authority, Woodland Trust or other) must carry out their own due diligence, obtaining appropriate ecological advice where necessary to determine whether surveys are required. It is in the interests of the landowner, or their appointed agent, to develop a scheme that is compliant with the UK Forestry Standard; this includes the requirement to ensure that the woodland creation project does not have an adverse effect on protected habitats and species.

A full desk based data search is important and should be the starting point, with appropriate action taken in relation to identified ecological constraints. You may also require specialist ecological advice to determine whether surveys are required and to [carry out and interpret](#) those surveys². If you decide to take the risk of going ahead with your scheme without specialist advice, then you need to be aware that it might get picked up at EIA screening stage, if EIA is needed, which may delay your scheme; and it may also result in potential harm to protected species/habitats which may lead to negative publicity, further action, and a requirement for additional work to address issues or restore a site to previous condition.

In some areas Natural England's new Tree Action Plan Advisers may be able to give site-specific advice; they can be contacted on woodlandcreation@naturalengland.org.uk (national mailbox).

¹ Woodland Creation Planning Grant

² We can provide a list of ecologists on request, but this does not constitute any recommendation.

General advice

A few general pointers are provided below to help you, but these should not be used in the place of specialist ecological advice. A preliminary site assessment by a competent ecologist should save time and expense by determining whether a full peat, bird or vegetation survey is needed.

PEAT: If there's any indication that peat or peaty soils may be present (e.g. from the peat layers on [MAGIC](#), from LRC data searches, or from other advice) then a site assessment or full peat survey should be done, with the findings being incorporated into the final design, because woodland creation should not take place on [deep peat](#), regardless of size of site.

BREEDING BIRDS: The [BTO Wader Zonal Map](#) will help with your assessment where waders may be an issue. In general, smaller sites are less likely to have a significant impact on birds, but you must factor in the context (and any cumulative effect). For example, proximity to a site notified for its bird interest, or a proposed planting scheme (whatever its species composition) in the middle of an area that is of importance for waders, could both potentially have a significant impact, regardless of size. Detailed wader guidance is currently being developed and we will provide it as soon as it is complete.

VEGETATION: If priority habitat (available on [MAGIC](#)) or a Local Wildlife Site is identified within or adjacent to the site then an ecological assessment should be made, regardless of site size; some habitats are so reduced in extent that even the loss of a very small area could be significant. The priority habitat layer is not fully accurate and not every area of important habitat is mapped; the only way to cover this is a site visit by someone able to assess the likely ecological interest. As above, a full National Vegetation Classification (NVC) survey is not always needed, but in the case of mapped priority habitat, you may decide it's simplest and quickest to go straight to NVC survey (depending on time of year).

Even if priority habitat is not present, there may also be potential issues with new woodland creation on other valuable open habitats, for example good quality semi-improved grassland. Further information on priority and other open habitats is available [here](#).

Updated survey briefs 2022

We have revised and updated our [survey briefs](#) for peat, vegetation and breeding birds, which should be followed whenever a survey is needed. In addition we are running webinars for consultant ecologists, to widen the pool of consultants available and to ensure they're aware of the revised survey requirements.