

3 JUNE 2024

Technical Note: Ecological Survey notes re vegetation clearance for cable lay

Site: Llandarcy, Neath

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Introduction

Amber Environmental Consultancy Ltd was commissioned by National Grid to provide ecological advice regarding woodland clearance for undergrounding cables on private land at Llandarcy, Neath.

The landowner is to undertake trenching to National Grid specification in order to underground cables across his land. The cabling will then be laid by National Grid. The exact route of the cabling has yet to be agreed. However, the landowner has recently undertaken a swathe of vegetation clearance through a strip of woodland prior to the proposed works. This area falls within the conservation area SP21/4(c) for Llandarcy Village (**Figure 1**).

Neath Port Talbot Council (NPTC) planning department staff and Tree Officer have visited the site and are now aware of the new ride cleared through the woodland. However, no further clearance should be undertaken until planning consent has been granted and wayleaves are in place.

Proposed plans for the works can be found in **Figure 2**. **N.B. This is not the definitive route of the cabling, as wayleaves and planning consent are still required.**

Site visit 31st May 2024

A site visit was undertaken on 31st May 2024 with National Grid staff to assess the ecological impact of the vegetation clearance.

The woodland area lies adjacent to the road and is shown in the Google Earth image in **Figure 3**.

The clearance runs in a swathe approximately 6m – 8m wide (more in places) through the woodland area and towards the field boundary to the west. A small linear area of woodland directly adjacent to the road has been left, and this varies in width as the cleared line moves across the slope.

Mature Ash *Fraxinus excelsior*, and Oak *Quercus robur* trees have been felled along the roadside and vegetation cleared up to the two existing poles with switches (**Figures 4 & 5**). It is understood that these trees were not within the agreed cleared area and have been felled after the visit by NPTC staff.

From the brash that has been left and piled along the edges of the new ride, Gorse *Ulex europaeus*, Bramble *Rubus fruticosus* agg., and saplings have been removed as well as larger trees that have been chipped (Figures 6, 7 & 8). Some trees have had branches removed (Figure 9).

The surrounding woodland that is left consists in the main of Oak, Sycamore *Acer pseudoplatanus*, Hazel *Corylus avellana*, Ash, Rowan *Sorbus aucuparia*, Hawthorn *Crataegus monogyna*, Willow *Salix* sp., Silver Birch *Betula pendula*, Gorse stands, and Holly *Ilex aquifolium* (Figure 10).

The understorey of the surrounding woodland varies in density and species diversity, from Ivy *Hedera helix* covering the ground with sparse Bramble, to denser stands with Rosebay Willowherb *Chamaenerion angustifolium*, Common Figwort *Scrophularia nodosa*, Lady Fern *Athyrium filix-femina*, Broad Buckler Fern *Dryopteris dilatata* and Male Fern *Dryopteris filix-mas* (Figure 11) amongst other vegetation.

Rhododendron *Rhododendron ponticum* (with flowers) is also present in some of the woodland understorey (Figure 12).

Other species may be present that were not visible at the time of the survey.

The route that has been cleared is now mainly bare earth with some woodchip from felled trees (Figures 13–15). Some regrowth is present in the form of Bramble, Bracken *Pteridium aquilinum* and ferns. The trees have been chipped, but the root plates and stumps have been pushed to the side of the ride, along with brash such as Gorse (Figure 16).

Ecological impacts and recommended actions

The main ecological impacts of this vegetation removal consist of the following:

- Removal of woodland, a section 7 Habitat of Principal Importance for Biodiversity in Wales
- Removal of potential bat roosts
- Removal of habitat with suitability for foraging/nesting birds, badgers, hedgehogs, reptiles, small mammals and a variety of invertebrates
- Potential disturbance of nesting birds within the vegetation that was cleared, depending on the timing of clearance
- Potential disturbance of bats – some larger trees may have had potential for bat roosts
- Potential harm and disturbance of reptiles during clearance works

The update to Planning Policy Wales 12 (PPW12) Chapter 6 requires that any planning proposals must demonstrate that they have both maintained and enhanced biodiversity and built resilient ecological networks. Green Infrastructure statements are now required with all planning applications. To demonstrate that biodiversity net benefit has been considered and will be achieved, the application of the stepwise approach to securing a net benefit must be applied, together with evidence of how ecosystem resilience will be achieved through the development process.

Avoidance of harm is preferable, and where impacts cannot be avoided, appropriate mitigation and compensation measures should then be put into place. This is known as the mitigation

hierarchy or stepwise approach. The DECCA framework sets out the elements to be taken into account namely:

1. diversity between and within ecosystems (Diversity)
2. the scale of ecosystems (Extent)
3. the connections between and within ecosystems (Connectivity)
4. the condition of ecosystems (including their structure and functioning); (Condition) and
5. the adaptability of ecosystems i.e. aspects of resilience (Adaptability).

As this part of the site has already been cleared, in order to minimise further impacts to biodiversity then the following measures are recommended:

- Retain the ride as bare ground rendering it unsuitable for nesting birds and reptiles until the cable laying process is complete. This will allow machinery to operate freely within the cleared area with low potential risk of harming these species groups.
- The ride should be allowed to regenerate naturally following completion of works with access retained for future repairs as required.
- The brash piles and tree stumps are currently piled around the edges of the ride. These are now suitable for use by reptiles and nesting birds as well as hedgehogs and other small mammals. If these piles are within the required working width, then they should be removed after bird nesting season has finished (i.e. September onwards until 1st March) and under ecological supervision to ensure no animals that may be using them are harmed.
- Any further tree works or vegetation clearance must have been agreed with the relevant authorities, and be undertaken outside the bird nesting season (bird nesting season generally runs from 1st March to end of August) and when reptiles are still active i.e. not when they are dormant (November – February).
- Any further tree works must be undertaken to British Standard BS3998 'Recommendations for Tree Work'.

Along the rest of the route, it is recommended that the following measures are implemented to minimise impacts to biodiversity:

- To minimise impacts to ground and tree/scrub nesting birds, any scrub/vegetation clearance should take place outside the bird nesting season which runs from March – August inclusive. If this is not possible, then a nesting bird check should be undertaken by a suitably experienced ecologist no more than 24 hours before the vegetation clearance commences and again on the morning of the scheduled works.
- If any active bird nests are found within the vicinity of the proposed works, then either a suitable sized buffer (5m–7m) will be required, or the works will be postponed until the birds have fledged or the nest becomes unviable.
- Scrub and tall vegetation should be removed via a two stage cut i.e. cut to a height of 200mm using hand tools and left for a couple of days, then cut down to 50mm with all arisings removed. This will make the habitat less suitable for reptiles and can then be stripped for the cable trenching.
- All trenching should be undertaken when reptiles are active i.e. outside the dormant season (see above) and can move away from the work area.

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- Trenches should be excavated with the turf and topsoil separated from the sub soil. The trenches should be backfilled and reinstated in the order they were excavated i.e. subsoil, then topsoil, and finally turf replaced on the finished surface level.
 - No trenches should be left open overnight. If this is not possible, then a means of escape such as ramps must be placed at periodic intervals.
 - Poles being removed during the dismantling process must be inspected for nesting birds and bats before removal. If bats are found, then a licence may be required from NRW in order to proceed with the works.

Figure 1: Llandarcy Village Conservation Area boundary (Datamap Wales website)

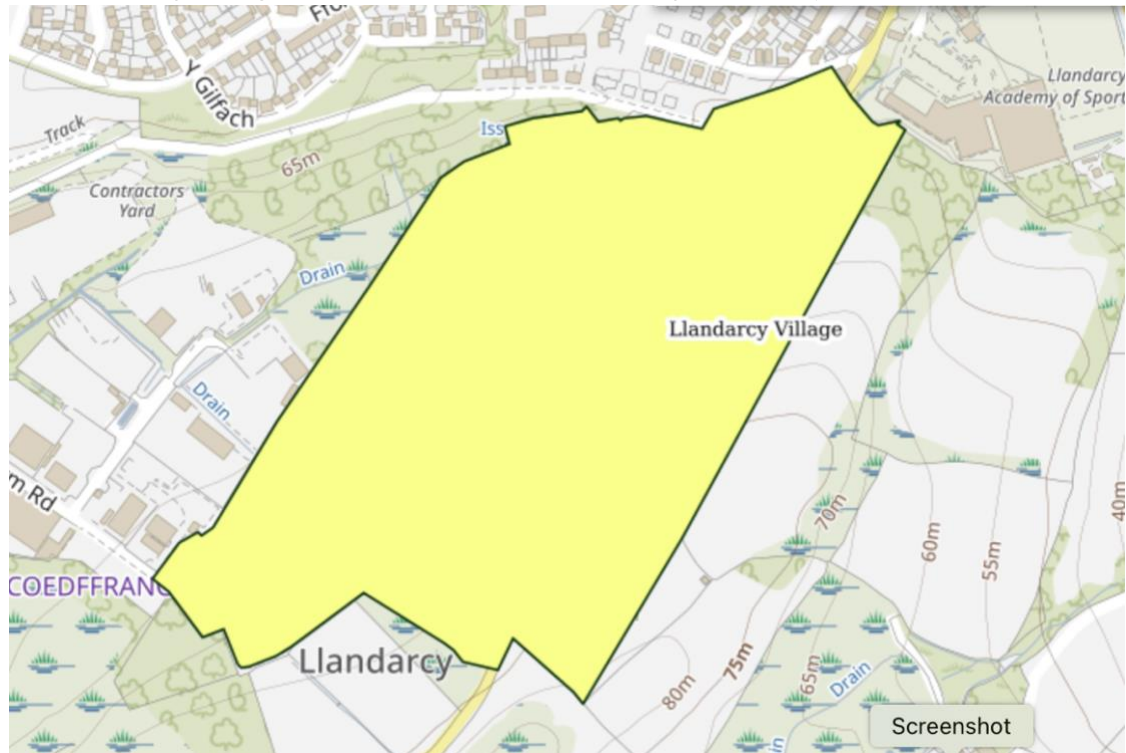


Figure 2: Proposed plans for the works.

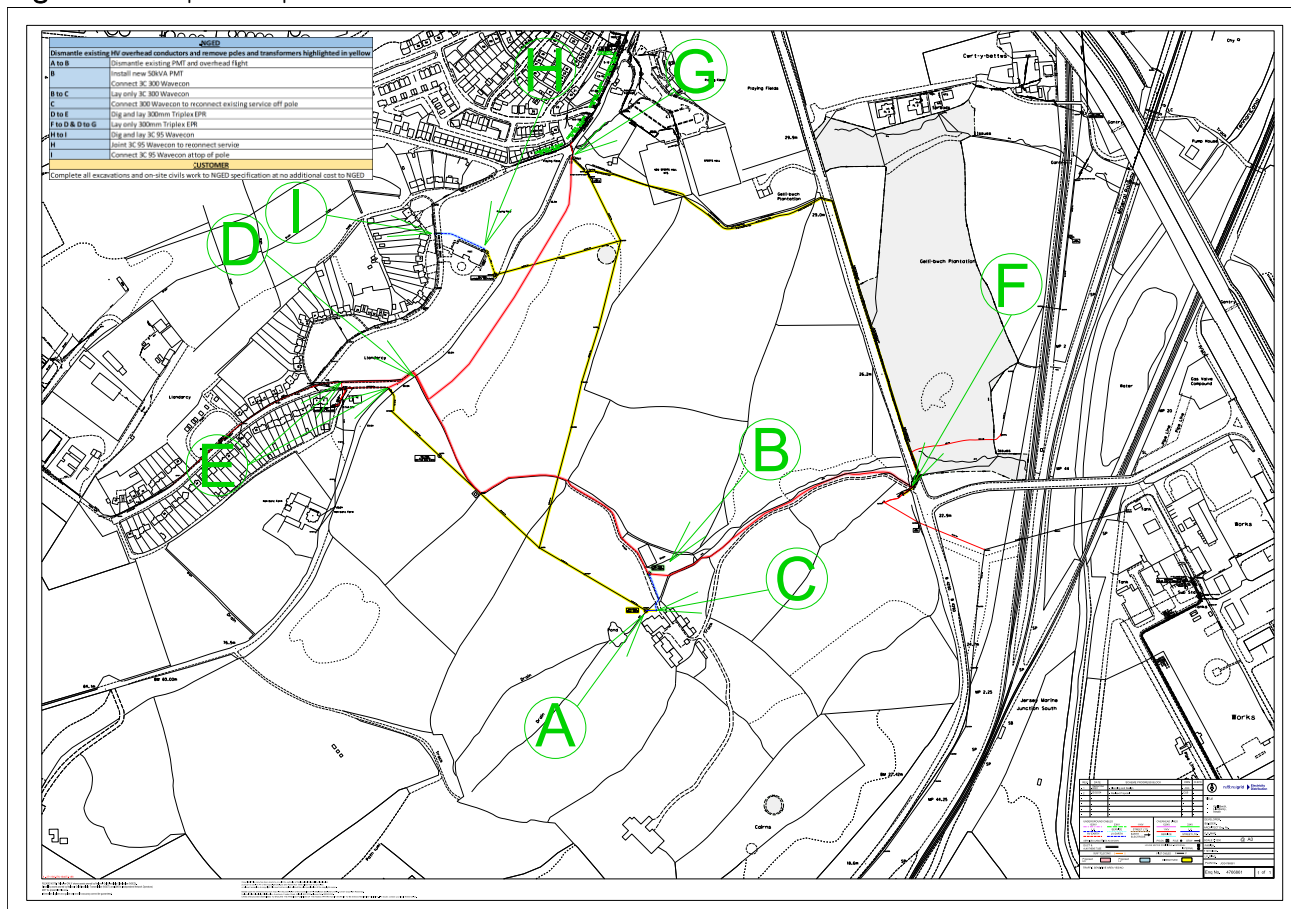


Figure 3: Google Earth image of the woodland area that has been partly cleared (red line= approximate area of clearance)



Figure 4: Felled roadside trees



Figure 5: Area cleared to roadside with felled trees



Figure 6: Brash piles with Gorse



Figure 7: Brash at the side of the newly cleared ride



Figure 8: Brash at the western end of the new ride



Figure 9: Oak with pruned branches



Figure 10: Existing woodland



Figure 11: Understorey with Ivy and Bramble



Figure 12: Rhododendron flowering within existing woodland



Figure 13: Newly cleared ride



Figure 14: Newly cleared ride with bare earth



Figure 15: Newly cleared ride with bracken regrowth



Figure 16: Woodchip and brash piles

