Many hydro-electric schemes tend to be located in remote uplands of the UK and these can often be in ecologically sensitive locations. These upland habitats are generally botanically diverse and they can support a range of ornithological interests; they may also be defined as designated assets that would fall under the auspice of the Habitat Regulations 2011. So one might assume they are highly likely to be subject to EIA or, even as a consequence of their locations, too sensitive for renewable energy developments?

One such scheme was identified by a Private developer for the purpose of generating up to 500kW of hydro-electricity on the Isle of Arran. Energy security is an important topic for the island as the supply from the mainland is not particularly reliable. The landscape on the island is particularly sensitive to change and the developer required an energy scheme that was considerate to the existing setting of the island. Therefore the developer contacted Dulas to investigate the potential for a hydro-electric scheme on the Beinn Bhreac and Cnoc a’Chapuil burns, which flow directly into Lamlash Bay, part of the Firth of Clyde. The intake, a compound, connecting trackway and approximately 2km of pipeline was proposed within an area designated as a Special Protection Area (SPA for Hen Harrier, Annex 1 Species of European Importance) and Site of Special Scientific Interests (SSSIs) for upland habitat assemblages such as the tall herb ledge, wet woodlands and breeding hen harrier.

Given its location and the site’s relative sensitivity, it was thought best to engage in pre-application consultation very early with the local authority and principal statutory consultees: SEPA, SNH and the Ayrshire Rivers Trust. A round table meeting was held to fully understand the concerns of the consultees at an early stage and it was anticipated that a considerable amount of assessment and evidence would be required for this particular scheme.

These meetings enabled the stakeholders to be aware of all of the constraints affecting the design of the scheme, not just their key areas of concern and expertise, at a very early stage.

In addition to discussing the general site constraints the project team felt that it would be useful to provide and discuss the outline construction method statement for the site. As planners and design engineers with over 30 years’ experience in the renewables industry, the construction methods employed are well known and tested, and these were conveyed to the decision makers at the meeting so that a full appreciation of the engineering challenges and solutions could be discussed in depth.

Following this meeting, a screening request was made supported by an outline method statement and draft environmental management plan; the local authority responded stating that there was no requirement for EIA. Such determination was made on the basis the potentially significant effects on the environment could be adequately controlled through appropriate construction methods and environmental practices.

Early involvement by specialist hydro design engineers ensured that buildability issues with the design and programme could be identified and addressed at an early stage and therefore fed into the reporting process in a timely manner. For example, despite the area being designated for hen harrier, no breeding bird surveys were requested, as SNH had excellent bird population records.

The approach to stakeholder engagement facilitated helpful feedback and allowed a number of issues to be resolved very early on that may have otherwise resulted in difficulties during planning approval. The authorities also had a clear understanding of the construction methods, including timing of construction outwith the breeding bird season within the SPA, best practice restoration techniques of the access track and other infrastructure components.
As a result the consultees felt that the engineering solutions outlined during the pre-application process and enshrined in the Environmental Reporting and the submitted CMS, if applied in accordance with best practice, was sufficient to relay any concerns. The consultees willingness and enthusiasm to engage early on in the process was paramount to the success of this application. Whilst everyone understood that energy security for the island was an important local issue, it was equally important to ensure the integrity of the SPA and SSSI; therefore the proposed good practice engineering solutions within the CMS meant timely determination of the application, within the statutory 8 weeks and no objections or requests for further environmental information.

_Sian Thomas, Dulas, April 2015._