



**Buffer Strips**  
Planning advice  
PA2023-16

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## **Purpose of this Planning Advice**

The purpose of this guidance is to provide details of the requirements for buffer strips adjacent to water courses and water bodies as outlined in the Aberdeenshire Local Development Plan (LDP) 2023, Policy PR1 Protecting Important Resources. The document explains the importance and function of buffer strips and sets out expected minimum requirements for the width of buffer to be provided. Details on the characteristics and management of buffers is also detailed.

This guidance reflects National Planning Framework 4 (NPF4) to protect biodiversity, reverse biodiversity loss, deliver positive effects from development and strengthen nature networks. This guidance assists in delivering nature -based solutions and enhancement of biodiversity as required by NPF4 Policy 3.

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## **1. Introduction**

A buffer strip is vegetated land adjacent to a water course that helps to control soil erosion and water quality and has other environmental benefits. Physical separation of activities from the stream maintains vegetation on the banks which can have a beneficial impact on water temperatures, enhances leaf litter inputs, enriches the riparian habitat and promotes connectivity between the river and its floodplain.

Buffer strips alongside water courses and water bodies are important in protecting and promoting biodiversity and in improving water quality and run-off. They assist access for maintenance. The effectiveness of a buffer strip will be influenced by the width of the buffer, its characteristics (slope, vegetation and soil type), and how it is managed.

This Planning Advice provides best practice and its guidance should be followed for all planning applications that may impact on water courses and water bodies.

## **2. Value**

Buffer strips alongside watercourses are valuable for the following reasons:-

- Larger buffer strips can reduce run-off into watercourses and therefore reduce flooding;
- They are essential in allowing access for the maintenance and inspection of watercourses, and for dealing with pollution incidents;
- They provide space for natural fluvial processes such as channel shape and planform adjustment which help restore and maintain the natural dynamic balance of river systems and associated habitats;
- Vegetation stabilises banks and reduces soil erosion;
- They provide a habitat for plants and animals and can form part of a habitat network;
- They provide opportunities for access;
- They can help to improve water quality by filtering run-off before it enters the watercourse;
- They provide opportunities to undertake restoration of straightened or realigned watercourses in the future;
- They improve the visual landscape of the area.

## **3. Recommended width of buffers**

The optimum width of a buffer strip adjacent to watercourses will be affected by the width of the water course, site conditions and topography. Buffer strips should be provided on both sides of the watercourse and, as noted below, buffer strips should be proportional to the bed width of the river. Where ecological survey identifies semi-natural habitat is present adjacent to the water course (e.g. riparian woodland or species rich grassland) the whole of this habitat should be protected, regardless of width. Where there are opportunities to undertake restoration of straightened or realigned watercourses, or where there may be such opportunities in the future, a wider buffer may be beneficial if this would be necessary to facilitate restoration.

Development proposals should not be supported within the Future Functional Floodplain other than for certain essential or compatible uses, as per the provisions of NPF4 policy 22. The need to protect the whole of the functional floodplain will override the buffer width guidelines suggested below. Areas at risk of disturbance by

fluvial processes will require a geomorphological assessment in order to assess the appropriate scale of the buffer strip.

Where the ground is steeply sloping, run-off will be faster and a wider buffer than specified in table 1 may be required to prevent run-off from agricultural land or other land uses entering the watercourse and causing siltation and/or pollution.

Buffers strips will contribute towards open space allocations associated with development.

For a site bordering still water (i.e. lochs and ponds) the margin should be between 6m and 20m wide, depending on the size of the water body with larger areas having a wider buffer.

For all watercourses a buffer strip of a **minimum** of 6m (on both sides of the watercourse) should be retained. Wider rivers will require a larger buffer strip and this could be up to 20m+ for major rivers such as the Rivers Dee and Don. This will be measured from the top of the bank.

For ditches a buffer strip is still required, but for smaller ditches best practice allows some discretion to reduce the buffer strip to a **minimum** of 3m on both sides of the ditch, depending on requirements for access for maintenance.

The design width of the buffer strip will be dependent on the site conditions such as the nature and topography of the surrounding land. Wet, poorly drained soils and steep slopes (>10°) will require a larger buffer strip. The table below, supported by SEPA and Nature Scot, provides a general indication of the width of the buffer strip that may be required, but remains only as a guideline.

Width of watercourse	Width of buffer strip required
Less than 1m	6m
1-5m	6-12m
6-15m	12-20m
More than 15m	20m+

Where possible bridge abutments must be a sufficient distance back from the river bank to allow for future river movement, and where appropriate allow access under the structure.

Buffer strips will usually be safeguarded through the use of conditions placed on planning approvals, but in exceptional circumstances permitted development rights related to built development may be removed.

Developers carrying out works in or adjacent to watercourses and water bodies should be aware of General Binding Rules under the Controlled Activities Regulations.

#### **4. Characteristics**

The characteristics of a buffer strip will influence its effectiveness.

During the construction phase of any development buffer strips should be fenced off and vegetation should be left undisturbed, particularly so where wetlands, woodland, grassland or other semi-improved habitats are present. Only in exceptional circumstances should the vegetation within a buffer strip be removed, and only then if required for its landscaping. All works should be carried out in accordance with SEPA Pollution Prevention Guidelines<sup>1</sup>.

If the land forming the buffer strip is arable or improved grassland the buffer strip will be most effective if more natural vegetation cover is introduced. There is merit in sowing with a grassland or wildflower mix made up of indigenous species, where possible from a local source.

The planting of locally native trees and shrubs will significantly enhance a buffer strip and can help to stabilise banks and limit erosion. Overhanging trees create shade and the leaf litter can provide shelter and food for invertebrates. Aberdeenshire Council would encourage this as part of the Landscaping component of any development, but only where there are no risks that planting could cause hydraulic issues downstream (such as confined culverts). Care should be taken to avoid too much planting with at least 50% of the watercourse left open to sunlight during the summer when leaves are on the trees.

Consideration should be made whether any proposed planting would potentially impede access to maintain the watercourse and, where this is a risk, details of means of access to the watercourse when planting is fully mature for suitable excavation plant must be provided.

It is important to avoid gaps in buffer strips in order to provide continuity of habitat.

The creation of hard standing such as vehicle access track should normally be avoided within buffer strips as this will increase run-off, however pedestrian access with permeable surfaces is generally acceptable and is to be encouraged.

## **5. Management**

Management prescriptions will be site specific and should be included in any Landscape Maintenance Plan. In general the preference would be to leave these as more natural areas with limited management of the vegetation. More intensive management of some areas may be appropriate for particular uses such as access and recreation.

Buffer strips should be identified as open space within the approved development proposal, to ensure its long-term protection. Where appropriate Buffer strips will be identified as “protected” in Local development Plans to ensure their continued presence.

## **6. Policy background**

Water Framework Directive (2005) Water Environment and Water Services Act establishes a new framework for the management and protection of the natural water environment.

The Nature Conservation (Scotland) Act 2004 introduces a duty on all public bodies to further the interests of biodiversity.

Aberdeenshire Local Development Plan Policy PR1 Protecting Important Resources requires Adequate buffer strips in order to protect and enhance all waterbodies within or adjacent to development sites. These are required to be integrated positively into the green-blue infrastructure of the site and surrounding area.

## **7. Additional Information**

NetRegs Guidance for Pollution Prevention 5 (PPG5) Guidance for Works and Maintenance in or Near Water [gpp-5-works-and-maintenance-in-or-near-water.pdf](http://netregs.org.uk/gpp-5-works-and-maintenance-in-or-near-water.pdf) ([netregs.org.uk](http://netregs.org.uk))

SEPA Good Practice Guide WAT-SG-44 ‘Riparian Vegetation Management’ [WAT-SG-44](http://sepa.org.uk/WAT-SG-44) ([sepa.org.uk](http://sepa.org.uk))

River Restoration Centre [Manual of River Restoration Techniques | The RRC](#)