

**VIP Stakeholder Advisory Group**  
**Meeting notes of the nineteenth meeting held on 21<sup>st</sup> & 22<sup>nd</sup> September 2021**

**Stakeholder Advisory Group members present:**

- **Chairman** Chris Baines
- **Campaign for National Parks** Ruth Bradshaw, Policy and Research Manager
- **Historic England** Amanda Chadburn, Senior National Infrastructure Adviser
- **Landscape Institute** Mary O'Connor, Fellow of the Landscape Institute  
Sue Sljivic, Fellow of the Landscape Institute
- **National Association of AONBs** Howard Sutcliffe, AONB Manager, Clwydian Range and Dee Valley AONB
- **National Grid** Aled Rowlands, Director, Corporate Affairs
- **National Parks England** Sarah Kelly, Landscape Officer, New Forest National Park Authority
- **National Trust** Dr Ingrid Samuel, Historic Environment Director
- **Natural England** Chris Davis, NRN Partnerships Manager (site visit)  
Gary Charlton, Landscape Senior Advisor (via Teams)
- **Ofgem** Anna Kulhavy, Senior Economist (via Teams)
- **Ramblers** Alison Hallas, Policy & Advocacy Officer

**Apologies:**

- Cadw
- CPRE
- CPRW
- National Parks Wales
- Natural Resources Wales

**Guests:**

- Tom Munro, Manager, Dorset AONB Partnership (site visit on 21<sup>st</sup> September)
- Henry Oliver, Director of North Wessex Downs AONB Partnership (site visit and presentation on 22<sup>nd</sup> September)

**Secretariat in attendance:**

- **National Grid** – Michelle Clark, VIP Project Manager; Ben Smith, VIP Project Manager (South); Eloise Frank, VIP Project Manager Snowdonia – (via Teams); Paul Hamnett, Senior Project Manager – Southern Projects; Steve Ellison, Senior Project Manager – Snowdonia (via Teams); Steve Lam, Regulatory Submissions Manager; Tim Martin, Project Manager – Peak East (via Teams)
- **Professor Carys Swanwick**, Independent Advisor to National Grid
- **Camargue** – Stuart Fox; Jane Dalton

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The Stakeholder Advisory Group attended project site visits to Dorset AONB (line section 4YA.7) on 21<sup>st</sup> September and North Wessex Downs AONB (line section YYM.1) on 22<sup>nd</sup> September.

The purpose of the meeting that followed on the afternoon of 22<sup>nd</sup> September was for the Stakeholder Advisory Group to:

- Hear updates on the other schemes prioritised for replacing existing overhead lines with underground cables in Areas of Outstanding Natural Beauty (AONBs) and National Parks.
- Receive an update on the Landscape Enhancement Initiative (LEI).
- Ratify the VIP and LEI policies for RIIO-T2.

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Updates on the Dorset and North Wessex Downs VIP projects were given by the project teams ahead of the site visits.

### **Day 1 – Dorset Project Information Centre**

Various discussions took place in the Dorset Project Information Centre and during the site visit. Senior Project Manager, Paul Hamnett introduced the project team and gave a brief update on progress before opening up the session to questions and discussion. All the ducting which will carry the cables is now installed, around 60 percent of the cabling is complete and work is well advanced on the construction of both cable sealing end compounds at either end of the project.

The project remains on track for the removal of the 22 pylons using both crane and felling techniques starting in summer next year with the project on target for completion in 2022.

The discussion was wide ranging touching on the civil engineering challenges encountered by the project, the archaeology (see below), the impact on and reaction of the local community to the work and the impact of Covid-19.

Two key areas for discussion were on how the lessons learned from the Dorset project would be used elsewhere and the opportunities that existed to restore the land back in a more imaginative way than is specified under the planning consent. The latter discussion extended into day two of the meeting and it was agreed that this was something that stakeholders should pursue through National Grid's landowner contacts.

In terms of lessons learned, Paul Hamnett explained the issues the team had had with the topography of the site which was exceptionally steep in places and in managing silt run off from the works. Exceptionally heavy rain during August 2020 and into the autumn had led to significant run off from the scheme and National Grid has worked closely with the Environment Agency and Dorset Council to implement measures to manage this. The silt / run-off management measures taken in Dorset have already been applied at the outset of the Peak East project and will be used across all VIP and wider National Grid cabling projects in future.

John Boothroyd of Oxford Archaeology was present and brought some of the archaeological finds with him to show to the Advisory Group. Over 40,000 artefacts were found during the approximately 6,000 archaeologist days worked on the project the earliest dating back 6,000 years to the Neolithic period. Among the other finds were iron age arrow heads, Roman pottery and a Saxon burial site with over 180 inhumations. The artefacts are currently being catalogued in Oxford and a Monograph on the finds will be produced. Discussions have begun with the Dorset County Museum in Dorchester and it is hoped that an exhibition can be staged in due course.

The project team with Oxford Archaeology, Advisory Group member, Amanda Chadburn from Historic England, Steve Wallis, the Dorset County Archaeologist and Tom Munro from the AONB Partnership gave a series of webinars earlier in the year on the finds. These can be accessed at <https://dorset.nationalgrid.co.uk/news-and-events/going-underground-digging-for-history-in-dorset/>.

### **Day 2 – Prior to Devizes site visit**

Ben Smith of National Grid gave an update on progress with the North Wessex Downs VIP project. The project team has done a considerable amount of work to identify a suitable route corridor. This has been complicated by the presence of an existing Wessex Water pipeline in the area and a Source

Protection Zone (SPZ) 1. The new route avoids the SPZ 1 which brings it close to residential properties on Horton Road. The National Grid team has visited the homeowners and explained the situation with the result that both households support the project going ahead.

In determining the best location for the western sealing end compound, the project will now involve the removal of 13 pylons (up from the original 11). The location selected makes use of an existing plantations to provide screening from day one and avoids interaction with the Wessex Water pipeline.

Ongoing surveys include ground investigation, hydrogeology, ecology (badgers, dormice and bats being the primary focus) and archaeology. A number of Iron Age and Romano British features have been identified along with a Neolithic pit. One inhumation (again Romano British) has been discovered as well as musket shot and cannonballs believed to be from the Civil War Battle of Roundway Down.

Landscaping around the sealing end compounds is being developed in consultation with Natural England, Wiltshire Council's Landscape Officer and the AONB Partnership. At the eastern end where the overhead line crosses the Kennet & Avon Canal, there are ongoing discussions with the Canal & River Trust in respect of the visual impact of the compound. The team is confident that the compound will be screened from both the canal and the towpath.

Stakeholder engagement remains positive with widespread support for the project coming from a broad range of stakeholders. The team is about to embark on a series of information events and presentations to councillors and interest groups. This will include taking a stand at the very popular Devizes market on consecutive Thursdays at the end of September / start of October.

The project timeline remains unchanged with both the planning application and Ofgem funding application due for submission in the first quarter of 2022. Survey work would continue in 2022 with construction starting in 2023 and the pylons being removed in 2024/25.

### **Day 2: Session 1 – Presentation about North Wessex Downs AONB**

The meeting began with a presentation from Henry Oliver, Director of the North Wessex Downs AONB Partnership about the North Wessex Downs AONB and the work of the AONB Partnership.

The discussions that followed focused on:

- The offer of contacts who may be able to provide archaeological expertise/support to assist with the work that is being carried out with farmers and farm managers to try to balance farming interests with those of the historic environment.
- The availability of designated funds from Highways England to address the issue of the M4 'severing' the ecology and habitat within the AONB – it was noted that the funds are available for existing roads, and that large-scale projects are currently being sought.
- Reinforcement of the issues that have previously been discussed around the lack of resource for AONBs to be able to explore these kinds of avenues.

Camargue also reiterated that when the planned walking festival postponed due to Covid-19 is rescheduled, the VIP project team would like to include a circular walk along the pylon route and is in discussion with the AONB Partnership team to realise this.

### **Day 2: Session 2 – Updates on the schemes shortlisted for underground projects**

Ellie Frank (Snowdonia) and Tim Martin (Peak East) from National Grid gave updates on the progress of the other VIP projects. A summary of the progress and specific issues for each of the schemes is outlined below.

### **2.1 – Snowdonia National Park – 4CZ.1**

This project involves constructing a tunnel under the Dwyrdd Estuary to carry the connection from Cilfor to the sealing end compound at Garth to join up with the existing cables that run under the Glaslyn Estuary to the northwest.

As previously discussed, the impact of potential future network requirements on the required tunnel capacity have been kept under review throughout the development of the project. Since the Stakeholder Advisory Group last met, the Government has set a new target for 40GW of electricity generation through offshore wind farms by 2030, and offshore wind leasing and other potential future requirements have impacted the Snowdonia VIP scheme. Following discussions between National Grid and Ofgem, it has been agreed that it is sensible to change the specifications of the Snowdonia scheme to construct a larger tunnel, as this will enable the most economic and efficient solution to be taken forwards. This has led to the requirement to re-run the tender which is currently under way with the appointment of a main contractor due in early 2022.

The main impacts of these changes on the project are:

- A slight widening of the construction land take at Garth.
- An increase in the permanent cable easement width between the western sealing end compound and the tunnel head house.
- An increase in the amount and height of the equipment needed at the western sealing end compound to cater for the increase in capacity from the previously planned 132kV cables (which would have permanently down-rated the capability of the existing circuits) to 400kV cables (which enable a much smaller reduction of capacity from the rest of the OHL route between Pentir and Trawsfynydd).
- An increase in equipment height and an extra row of sealing ends at the eastern tunnel head house/sealing end compound to connect the extra cables – no additional land take is required at this end and there is no change to either tunnel head house building design.

With regards to impacts on the planning applications, National Grid is now waiting for a final planning decision notice from Snowdonia National Park Authority [post meeting note, this has now been received]. For the eastern sealing end compound/tunnel head house, a non-material amendment application will need to be submitted. For the western end the amendments fall under National Grid's permitted development rights. Section 106 agreements for biodiversity net gain with SNPA are already in place, and there could be minor changes required to the marine licence around the number of cables [post meeting note, no change is required].

Good progress has been made in other areas of the project's development. Ongoing activity includes:

- Carrying on with the ground water management and monitoring at Cilfor.
- Updates to the ecological surveys.
- Pre-construction archaeological and ecological mitigation.
- Pre-construction survey work including ground investigation surveys.

Progress on land rights is also going well, with 95% (54 of 57) of the agreements either contracted or agreed in principle, and three still under negotiation. As previously advised, a Compulsory Purchase Order was progressed in order to mitigate any financial or legal risks to the project, however the last

of the objections have now been withdrawn and a response from BEIS on the Unopposed Order is expected within the next couple of months [post meeting note, CPO has now been confirmed].

Due to the above changes, the indicative programme for this project has now been extended to allow for the extended tender period and slightly longer construction period. The tender prices should be confirmed by the end of November, and the subsequent funding application will be submitted to be considered and decided upon by Ofgem by May 2022. Between the end of this year and the funding decision, the National Grid team will work with the contractor on additional survey and GI work so that once a decision has been made, construction can commence straight away in 2023. Tower removal should now take place by the end of 2029 which is later than originally planned.

In response to a question regarding the likelihood of gaining Ofgem approval for the scheme given the increased costs arising from the changes to future network requirements, National Grid reiterated that Ofgem have been kept up to date throughout. Ofgem confirmed that there are a number of factors that they need to take into consideration. A key component is seeing that the Stakeholder Advisory Group is still endorsing that this is the right project to take forwards despite the increase in costs, but also that proper consideration has been given to this decision in the light of the material changes. Under the terms of the VIP scheme the undergrounding would need to maintain existing capacity, so Ofgem and their NG counterpart need to determine whether the increased load should be funded outside of the RIIO-T1 provision or remains within it. It was confirmed that the initial case information has already been submitted to Ofgem.

The project was shortlisted as a finalist in two categories of the annual industry planning awards promoted by *Planning* magazine (Planning Permission of the Year, and Award for Stakeholder Engagement in Planning), and was highly commended in Planning Permission of the Year. Thanks were given to Chris Baines, the National Trust and Snowdonia National Park Authority, Gwynedd Council and Natural Resources Wales who submitted testimonials as part of the awards entries.

## **2.2 – Peak District National Park (eastern section – ZO.2)**

Construction on the project began in May 2021 and involves the undergrounding of 1.5km of cable beneath the Trans Pennine Trail (TPT), the removal of seven pylons and the existing sealing end compound in Dunford Bridge, the construction of a new sealing end compound in Wogden Foot local wildlife site (a former railyard), and the construction of a temporary accessible diversion to the TPT across local farmland north of the River Don.

The Stakeholder Advisory Group was shown a series of pictures showing the progress that has been made on the scheme since the last meeting. Footage taken from a drone flyover was also shown. This has been taken to give an idea of progress in the project from an aerial viewpoint – it will be repeated once a month to show people how the project is progressing, and timelapse cameras are also going to be installed at key locations.

Construction of the haul road allowing access to construction area from north of the river is well under way. All of the earth piles arising from the excavation works have been marked up to ensure that they will be replaced in exactly the same place and order they were extracted from, and seed harvesting has taken place to ensure that the reinstated landscape will ultimately look exactly the same as it did prior to the construction works.

The two new bridges over the River Don include a permanent bridge that will be taken over by Yorkshire Water after the project has been completed, and a temporary bridge forming part of the TPT diversion. The concrete blocks that have been used to construct the temporary bridge are

designed so that they can be taken away at the end of the project and used elsewhere. Silt trap trenching has also been installed to protect the fields and the River Don from any run-off. This latter activity is as a direct result of lessons learned on the Dorset VIP project.

The car park in Dunford Bridge will undergo a complete redesign and upgrade including the provision of additional spaces, a dedicated horsebox area, new mounting steps, and design features intended to prevent excessive vehicle speeding (as suggested/requested by members of the local community).

The diversion route for the TPT is due to be completed in December 2021, and there will be a period of approximately four weeks before the current route is closed to ensure that the local council is happy with the temporary route before the existing route is shut down. This four-week period will also create a window where both the temporary and the existing route will be open, creating a circular route in the valley. There are plans to promote this unique opportunity to walkers and other trail-users.

Some trees have had to be cut back for construction works within Wogden Foot – the original plan was to take down a lot more trees than has actually been needed (approximately 40% of the trees originally planned for removal have been retained) meaning that the screening outcome outlined in the 10-15 year plan has already been partially achieved.

With regards to biodiversity net gain, a lot is being done to support net gain more widely in the area, including National Grid partnering with Banks Group to look at one of their quarry sites, with plans including taking out non-native trees, and putting in footpaths to discourage people from rambling through the sensitive heathland habitat. With the tree savings and other ongoing/planned work, the current net gain is set to be around 17-18 percent.

There has been a strong focus on community relations, with one example being the gate manager to the site providing a supply of dog and horse treats. This has generated a lot of positive feedback from existing trail users.

The current indicative timetable for the project includes the following key milestones:

- Main construction to start in December 2021 once the existing TPT route is closed.
- Cables due to come to site in March 2022.
- New sealing end compound completed by the end of June 2022.
- Cables energised in July 2022.
- Pylon removal and reopening of the TPT by September 2022.
- Commencement of car park works and removal of the haul road and temporary TPT diversion in October 2022.
- Completion of car park works by January 2023 and project completion by February 2023.

### **2.3 – Cotswolds National Landscape – ZF.2(B)**

This scheme has been selected to be taken forwards as an emerging project for RIIO-T2. The focus is on the central section of the longer section of overhead line identified as high priority in the original landscape assessment, which runs across the Cotswold Plateau just to the north-east of Cheltenham. The scheme would involve the undergrounding of approximately 7km of line and the removal of up to 20 pylons.

Work to date has included: constraints mapping, stakeholder mapping, public rights of way considerations, looking at sealing end compound locations and exploring potential cable routes. The adjoining sections of line (ZF.2(A) and (C)) at the northern and southern ends are also being investigated for the potential implementation of engineering innovations to further mitigate the

visual impact of ZF.2 as a whole. These innovations could include e.g.: reducing the height of the pylons that are not being removed by replacing them with the new RICA (Retro-fit Insulated Crossarm) pylons, new types of polymeric insulator that would stand out less than the existing insulators, and tower colouring/painting which has now been implemented in Scotland.

The Stakeholder Advisory Group was shown pictures of the emerging indicative cable route and potential sealing end compound locations. It was noted that the project is not without its challenges, primarily around access to the plateau itself (there are few existing roads), the steepness of the terrain, and difficulties with the location of the southern sealing end compound.

There is a wide-ranging stakeholder group including four local authorities, three MPs, a number of parishes, and a town council. The area also has a large PROW (Public Rights of Way) network which is both heavily-used and nationally promoted – the Cotswold Way is one of the most used of the National Trails. There are a lot of landowners and National Grid is about to start conversations with them and key stakeholders. An initial workshop with the Cotswolds National Landscape is due to take place at the Dorset VIP project site on 6<sup>th</sup> October.

The project team is also exploring some of the issues and options for the scheme in more detail including e.g. looking at the type of equipment that would be needed, determining the required road gradients, and appraising route options such as going round contours and avoiding tree plantations/ancient woodland etc.

Subject to successful project development, consultation and engagement in the remainder of 2021 and during 2022, the current indicative programme for this scheme would be for the planning application to be submitted in 2023, Ofgem determination and contractor award in 2024, and construction commencing in 2025.

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### **Session 3 – Ratification of the RIIO-T2 VIP policy**

Michelle Clark from National Grid gave an update on the progress of revisions to the VIP and LEI policies for RIIO-T2.

As part of the process for National Grid to have a new RIIO-T2 licence in place, the VIP and LEI policies need to be updated and renewed for approval and ratification by Ofgem. Following consultation and comment from Stakeholder Advisory Group members over the last few weeks, the policies have been updated and redrafted in line with comments from Advisory Group members, and the final draft was circulated to members in the previous week.

National Grid asked for the Stakeholder Advisory Group to approve the final draft of the updated policies. Unanimous approval was given.

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### **Session 4 – Update on the Landscape Enhancement Initiative (LEI)**

Ben Smith from National Grid gave an update on progress with the LEI.

#### **4.1 – Project applications update**

The new streamlined LEI application process was introduced in April 2021, and this should make the application process quicker.

- **Window 8** – Seven projects were approved in July 2021 (RIIO-T1 projects).



- **Window 9** – Ten applications were submitted, of which 40% are in Wales. The LEI Approvals Panel was due to meet on 23<sup>rd</sup> September to discuss them.
- **Window 10** – Expressions of Interest opened in March 2021.

Monitoring of ongoing projects is going well and the new website is under production. There are now a number of very good case studies that are providing material for further promotion of the scheme. It was noted that the webinars have worked very well in promoting the opportunities that the LEI scheme provides to wider partner organisations, and this in turn has encouraged organisations to approach the AONB Partnerships and National Park Authorities to put project ideas forwards. It was also noted that the quality of submissions continues to rise, and this helps everyone – including Ofgem – to understand what can be achieved.

#### **4.2 – Issues affecting project delivery**

Contingency discussions are being held regarding issues arising from Brexit and Covid-19 that are impacting project delivery. A number of LEI applicants have raised issues that are affecting the progress and implementation of their projects including inflationary figures (e.g. fuel costs up by 18%, materials up by 30%). The LEI Approvals Panel is working with the applicants and will be speaking to Ofgem about how to find a solution so that project outputs can still be delivered.

#### **4.3 – Expression of thanks to Mary O’Connor**

Thanks were expressed to Mary O’Connor for her contribution to the development of the LEI, and the fantastic progress and outcomes that have been achieved since the initial suggestion was made to allocate a small percentage of the overall VIP fund to smaller landscape projects. Sue Sljivic will be replacing Mary on both the Stakeholder Advisory Group and the LEI Approvals Panel, and she was welcomed to the group.

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### **Session 5 – Any other business and future meetings**

#### **5.1 – Capitalising on the outputs of VIP**

A discussion was held about the opportunities that the achievements from VIP and the LEI now give to promote what can be achieved in terms of landscape enhancement on a more strategic level. It was suggested that a separate working group could be set up to look at this in more detail.

**Action: Chris Baines to propose next steps**

#### **5.2 – Future meetings**

The next Stakeholder Advisory Group meeting will take place in March 2022 and will involve a site visit to the Peak East project with a focus on the northern schemes.