

**National Grid – 24th VIP Stakeholder Advisory Group
Minutes from the meeting held on 12th March 2024**

Stakeholder Advisory Group members present:

- **Chairman** Chris Baines
- **Cadw** Ashley Batten, Regional Inspector of Ancient Monuments & Archaeology North Wales
- **Campaign for National Parks** Ruth Bradshaw, Policy Officer [dialled in]
- **CPRE** Paul Miner, Head of Policy and Planning
- **Historic England** Luke Wormald, Head of East Region & Infrastructure
- **National Landscapes Association** Howard Sutcliffe, Manager, Clwydian Range & Dee Valley National Landscape [dialled in]
- **National Parks England** Sarah Kelly, Landscape Officer, New Forest National Park Authority
- **National Parks Wales** Jonathan Cawley, Director of Planning and Land Management, Eryri National Park Authority
- **National Trust** Dr Ingrid Samuel, Placemaking & Heritage Director
- **Natural England** Mike Burke, Programme Director – Sustainable Development
- **Natural Resources Wales** Mary Lewis, Sustainable Places Land & Sea Manager [dialled in]
- **RSPB** Alun Prichard, Director Cymru

Secretariat in attendance:

National Grid – Mike Elmer, Programme Director HVDC projects; Michelle Clark, VIP Project Manager; Tim Hewish, Strategic External Affairs Manager; Steve Ellison, Senior Project Manager, Eryri VIP; Robbie Griggs, Lead Project Manager Cotswolds VIP; Amardeep Malhi, Lead Project Manager North Wessex Downs VIP and LEI Project Manager; Chris Plester, Net Gain Technical Lead

Professor Carys Swanwick – Independent Landscape Advisor to National Grid

Camargue – Stuart Fox; Jane Dalton [dialled in]

Apologies: Ruth Jenkins, Natural Resources Wales, Stephen Russell, Ramblers

The VIP Stakeholder Advisory Group meeting took place at Belton Hall in Lincolnshire on 11th-12th March 2024, and included a site visit to the Viking Link project site at Bicker Fen.

The purpose of the VIP Stakeholder Advisory Group section of the meeting was for the Stakeholder Advisory Group to:

- Hear updates on the schemes prioritised for replacing existing overhead lines with underground cables in National Landscapes [formerly known as Areas of Outstanding Natural Beauty (AONBs)] and National Parks in England and Wales.
- Receive an update on the Landscape Enhancement Initiative (LEI).
- Revisit the shortlist of potential VIP projects that could be taken forwards in RIIO-T3.

Session 1 – RIIO-T3 Preparation

Michelle Clark from National Grid gave a reminder of the submission process for the RIIO-T3 price control period which will begin in April 2026. As part of that process National Grid has to include its thinking about VIP in RIIO-T3, including plans for further major undergrounding projects.

The timeline for the RIIO-T3 price control submissions is for National Grid to make the first submission to Ofgem in July 2024, and the final submission in December 2024. In order to inform the consumer Willingness to Pay exercise that will be carried out in advance of the July submission, National Grid needs the Stakeholder Advisory Group's input in helping to identify the most likely potential undergrounding projects that could be taken forwards during RIIO-T3.

At the last VIP Stakeholder Advisory Group meeting in November 2023, the group agreed that they would support pursuing at least one undergrounding project in RIIO-T3, alongside continuing with the LEI scheme. At this meeting, all of the remaining highest priority 'Purple' and next priority 'Red' routes were revisited, including a reminder of the projects that had been ruled out previously for a variety of reasons.

Subsequent discussions narrowed the remaining projects down to a shortlist of six, and the National Grid project teams have since been carrying out further development and optioneering work on these projects.

At today's meeting Michelle Clark gave an update on each of the six shortlisted projects, including:

- An overview of each project including the location, main features, landscape/visual impacts, and a reminder of the original LVIA score.
- A summary of the environmental and technical constraints, the proposed methodology, and progress with identifying the cable route and sealing end compound locations.
- A recap of the discussions that took place in 2014 and 2019 when decisions were being made about the projects to be taken forwards during RIIO-T1 and T2.
- A recap of the reasons why these specific projects were not taken forwards previously.

A high-level summary of each of these presentations is provided in 1.1.i to 1.1.vi below, and separate discussions that focused on potential overarching principles that could be used in deciding which schemes should be progressed as part of RIIO-T3 are summarised in 1.3.

It was reiterated that there is still no requirement to commit to specific projects for RIIO-T3, but the information that is required at this stage includes the sort of projects that could be taken forwards, and the likely scale of investment. What will actually go ahead into the final submission to Ofgem will depend on the deliberations and outcomes from the Willingness to Pay exercise and the subsequent acceptability testing. However, if the shortlist can be narrowed down further, this will better inform the Willingness to Pay exercise, and will also enable National Grid's engineering teams to focus their efforts on the most likely schemes.

1.1.i – Peak District National Park (West) – 4ZO.3 & 4

LVIA score 27/28

Undergrounding of 9.16km of OHL and up to 38 pylons

This scheme involves two subsections of line:

- Subsection 4ZO.3 is 3.6km long. It runs from the head of the upper Longdendale Valley where the line emerges from the Woodhead Tunnel and runs down the valley to the weir between the Woodhead and Torside Reservoirs.
- Subsection 4ZO.4 is 5.56 km long. It starts at the east of Woodhead Reservoir and runs along the south side of the Torside, Rhodeswood and Valehouse Reservoirs in the lower Longdendale Valley, from Crowden to Tintwistle.

The OHL runs close to the Trans Pennine Trail (TPT), and the visual impact of the pylons on users of the TPT scored very high in the original LVIA. A lot of the proposed cable burial route would follow the TPT, which – as required for the Peak District East project – would mean the need for diversions.

The engineering challenges for this project would be significant. The terrain is very steep and mountainous on one side, and the reservoirs present another major constraint. Due to the challenging terrain, multiple environmental designations, the reservoirs and the need to keep the TPT open, it is believed that it would be necessary to use a tunnelled or part-tunnelled solution. As it is unlikely that it will be possible to cross the reservoirs, the option to stop before them is also being considered.

The project has widespread stakeholder support. Some stakeholders also have aspirations to extend the scope of the scheme beyond the National Park and on to Stalybridge. This would make it a much longer route, but would also take it beyond the boundary of the National Park, so technically this could not be delivered under the VIP scheme.

The potential for interactions with other infrastructure in the area has previously been discussed, however the latest update is that plans for a potential new road through the area are (currently) not being taken forward.

Recap of discussions from 2014 and 2019:

- Highly intrusive line in the Dark Peak – Longdendale Valley.
- Range of solutions proposed following Long-term Futures Study.

Reasons for not pursuing in 2014 and 2019:

- Deliverability within each price control period due to:
 - Complex engineering.
 - Environmental location (ecology/archaeology).
- Uncertainty over preferred methodology and SEC location – some stakeholders did not support the proposed location south of Bottom’s Reservoir.

For all of these reasons the Peak District East project was seen as preferable, and that project has now been delivered.

1.1.ii – Dorset National Landscape – 4VN.2

LVIA score 25

Undergrounding of 3.6+ km of OHL and up to 19 pylons

This scheme was not pursued previously as another section of line (Dorset 4YA.7 – undergrounding project now completed) was considered by local stakeholders and the SAG to be a better option and was also preferred by the National Landscape team (formerly the AONB Partnership). 4VN.2 is part of a different overhead line, but it is geographically close to the completed project.

4VN.2 is to the east of Weymouth, between Dorchester and Bridport. It crosses over open chalk downland and briefly parallels an escarpment to the south. There is low visual impact on communities, but high impact on trail and rights of way users in the area. As always, there would be challenges in locating the sealing end compounds, but the benefits on the views of the escarpment would be significant.

With regard to environmental constraints, there are few designations within the project area, but there is some sensitive ecology. Other considerations include some ancient woodland, a scheduled ancient monument, a Grade 1 listed building, and the potential for undiscovered archaeology.

The project would involve direct burial of the cables using an open trench/ducted solution, broadly along the route of the existing OHL. The route is largely under agricultural use, and whilst there is some challenging topography, it is not considered to be unmanageable. There are no significant access issues in this location.

Recap of discussion from 2014 and 2019

- Through classic chalk downland to east of Weymouth
- Few designations and largely under agricultural use

Reasons for not pursuing in 2014 & 2019

- Dorset 4YA.7 considered a better option, and preferred in 2015 by Dorset AONB Partnership
- Dorset (4YA.7) has now been delivered

1.1.iii – Wye Valley National Landscape – 4YU.2

LVIA Score 24

Undergrounding of 4km of OHL and 10+ pylons, plus removal of a sealing end compound

This short section lies in rural Herefordshire to the south of Ross-on-Wye and runs centrally through the National Landscape. It is close to small villages and ancient woodland, and is contiguous with a recently undergrounded section of line under the River Wye.

The route runs across undulating farmland, and the project would involve direct burial of the cables using an open trench/ducted solution. The new cable would join up with the existing underground section that was installed under the River Wye approximately 10 years ago.

In the 2014 LVIA, the project was considered to have overall visual impacts of high importance for local communities and users of the trails, cycleways and public rights of way in the area.

Environmental constraints are more numerous, including eight SSSIs within 5km, SACs, ancient woodlands, numerous grade 2 listed buildings, and several ancient monuments. There are also some fishing lakes that would need relocating, a nearby DNO line, and narrow roads mean that access could be problematic.

Recap of discussions from 2014 and 2019:

- Contiguous with underground section under the River Wye.
- Important woodland and historic buildings.

Reasons for not pursuing in 2014 and 2019.

- Others considered better options.
- Impact on community where relatively recent undergrounding had taken place.

1.1.iv – North Wessex Downs National Landscape – 4YG.2

LVIA score 24

Undergrounding of 3.1km of OHL and 8+ pylons, plus removal of a sealing end compound

This short section of line is to the north-east of the National Landscape, and is north of (and adjacent to) a section of existing underground cable through the Goring Gap. The OHL runs past villages and isolated properties through typical rolling chalk landscape. The pylons often break the skyline and are therefore visually prominent in places.

The existing North Wessex Downs VIP project which is currently underway is on a different overhead line on the western side of the National Landscape (OHL section YYM.1).

The project would involve direct burial of the cables using an open trench/ducted solution. At approximately 3km, it would be one of the shorter sections of line that has been put forward for undergrounding, but it would have high positive benefit on National Trail and public right of way users, and moderate benefit on local communities.

Environmental constraints include the existence of several SSSIs and one SAC. There would be a need to work around existing gas and water supplies, as well as several Grade II listed buildings.

Recap of discussions from 2014 and 2019:

- Contiguous with underground section at Goring Gap.
- Mainly agricultural, some settlement, A-road crossing.

Reasons for not pursuing in 2014 and 2019

- The YYM line was considered a better option, and YYM.1 is in the process of being undergrounded.

1.1.v – Eryri National Park – ZK.1

LVIA score 22

Undergrounding of 11.5km of OHL and 36 pylons

This section of line comes out of the former Trawsfynydd Power Station, and runs due east through remote, highly-designated heath and moorland.

Due to the remoteness of Section ZK.1, the majority of the route is either unsettled or has only scattered settlements and properties. This section was therefore considered in the original LVIA assessment to have low visual impact on communities, but it does have moderate to high visual impacts on the users of the rights of way and open access land that run along the route.

A number of important archaeological sites – including several Roman sites and other scheduled ancient monuments – also exist along the route, including some that are directly underneath the OHL. The opportunities arising from archaeological investigations are considered to be an opportunity should this project be pursued.

There are extensive environmental constraints, including four nearby SSSIs (and nine others within 5km of the OHL), as well as a national nature reserve, several SACs, areas of blanket bog, bird life and extensive scattered areas of ancient woodland.

Due to the difficult terrain and topography, National Grid is not yet confident that this project could be trenched or ducted. This would need to be investigated in more detail during any further exploratory work. Access to the site at the eastern end is also expected to prove challenging.

Geographically, ZK.1 is relatively close to the Eryri project in the Dwyrdd Estuary (OHL section 4ZC.1) which is currently under way, and which will still be in delivery during the majority of RIIO-T3. It was also noted that Trawsfynydd could potentially be the focus of some of the Government's plans for new nuclear power, so there could be a lot of focus on the area in the future.

Recap of discussions from 2014 and 2019:

- Highly scenic and remote.
- Important Roman sites.

Reasons for not pursuing in 2014 and 2019

- Highly complex site environmentally – historic and natural.
- Remoteness makes working difficult.
- Dwyrdd Estuary line in process of being undergrounded.

1.1.vi – Lake District National Park ZX.1

LVIA score 21

Undergrounding of 6.6km of OHL and 22 pylons

This section of line was not included in the original 2014 landscape and visual assessment, as at the time a decision was still pending on proposals to extend the boundary of the National Park in this area to the east. The proposed changes to the boundary were subsequently confirmed, meaning that this section of line is now in rather than on the edge of the National Park, and the length of line in question is also now greater. A new assessment was therefore carried out in 2018, and the LVIA score of 21 placed it towards the bottom of the 'Red' list.

Section ZX.1 enters the National Park approximately 8km to the south of Shap. The line passes close to the A6 and skirts along the inside edge of the Park boundary before exiting south of the Borrowdale valley.

The area is mostly unsettled, with sparse and dispersed local communities. The line largely shares the same corridor as the A6, and is particularly visible as it goes up over Shap Summit. A DNO line operated by ENWL runs in close parallel for the majority of the route of the OHL.

There are no national trails or cycleways in the vicinity, however although the A6 is not designated as a National Cycle Route, a high number of cyclists use the road, partly because it forms part of the Land's End to John O' Groats long distance cycle route.

Environmental constraints include the existence of SSSIs and SACs, acidic grassland, blanket bog on deep peat, and a large and diverse upland breeding bird population. Some of the route lies within the Lake District World Heritage Site, and there are several Grade II listed buildings

The engineering would be challenging due to the steep slopes and presence of hard rock. There are significant issues relating to access in this location, partly because of the topography but also due to 'pinch-points' along the route, and access would be even more difficult in the winter. The cable route might also need to go a longer way round in order to avoid the SACs.

Recap of discussions from 2019:

- Bleak, open and remote moorland.
- High impact on Shap summit and footpaths.
- Close to A6.

Reasons for not pursuing in 2019

- DNO line running in parallel.
- Many designations/difficult terrain.
- Remoteness makes working difficult.

1.2 – Existing DNO lines

A brief discussion was held about the issues around DNO lines that run alongside National Grid overhead lines, and the potential for these to be considered for undergrounding at the same time as the VIP projects.

Similar to the discussions during earlier rounds of decision-making about which VIP projects to take forwards, there was a general consensus that there is little point in removing National Grid pylons from the landscape when the DNO lines that run in close proximity/parallel to those routes would still exist.

There was a reminder that whilst a separate Ofgem provision for the undergrounding of DNO lines does exist, the provision is completely separate to the VIP funding, and the budgets are managed by the DNOs. There is also a difference in the timing of price control periods for the DNOs vs National Grid, and historically this has meant that it has been considered problematic to try to match up the planning and agreement of more than one undergrounding scheme in the same location.

It was, however, noted by two Stakeholder Advisory Group members, that the process for considering undergrounding of DNO lines is much more informal than the VIP process. For example, in the past the National Park Authorities/AONB Partnerships have talked directly to a DNO about whether undergrounding could be considered, and the DNOs are also able to engage more broadly with other parties. On this basis, some members felt that there is scope to push for the DNO lines that exist alongside National Grid lines to be undergrounded at the same time as the VIP projects.

With regards to costs, whilst it is not known whether the DNO provision would be enough to cover the costs for undergrounding the DNO lines, there is an assumption that – provided it is technically possible for both to be done – then the cost of both would be less than the cost of doing them separately.

It was further noted that the benefits of being able to remove a DNO line at the same time as a National Grid OHL would be a further endorsement to the VIP scheme, and a clear demonstration of what can be achieved with joined-up thinking/planning.

1.3 – Overarching principles

In addition to conversations about the merits, engineering challenges, stakeholder support, consumer appetite and overall viability for each of these schemes, the option to apply broader principles in deciding which scheme(s) to take forward was revisited. There was also a reminder from National Grid about the practicalities that will limit what can feasibly be delivered in RIIO-T3, including supplier market constraints for both specialist contractors and resources, as well as the strategic infrastructure challenges that National Grid are facing. As previously reported, these

constraints mean that it will only be feasible for one or two VIP projects to be taken forwards during the next price control period, depending on their scale.

Potential overarching principles that were explored further included:

- Thinking again about whether additional sections of line should be considered in areas where schemes have already been taken forwards for undergrounding. It was acknowledged that this consideration has influences in both directions, e.g. further investment in an area that has already had a scheme would demonstrate progress in building landscape enhancement, but the counter argument is that the VIP investment should be spread as broadly as possible.
- Whether to take into account geographical spread and/or prioritise projects that would create a more equal spread across National Landscapes and National Parks.
- Whether the proportion of investment in relation to the amount of infrastructure in a designated area should be taken into account, e.g. pursuing another scheme in Eryri National Park could look like the area is getting a disproportionate amount of investment, but it has a higher proportion of infrastructure than some other areas.
- Whether to focus on sections of line that have a higher visual impact on communities and visitors, as opposed to those that are in more remote areas. With regards to the latter, it was suggested that the LEI could provide a useful opportunity to bring more visitors in by using it to promote access to more remote areas alongside the undergrounding.
- Whether to focus on the 'easier' schemes – particularly in the light of the broader national infrastructure challenges facing National Grid – or push forwards with delivering the more challenging schemes.
- Whether to invest in one expensive scheme or attempt to spread the investment more broadly.

1.4 – Discussion and outcomes

Following discussions in smaller break-out groups, it was agreed that more information is needed and a number of additional options need to be explored before the list of projects can be narrowed down further.

In particular, it was agreed that it would be useful for National Grid to:

- Explore – as a general principle – the feasibility and likelihood of being able to pursue the option of undergrounding DNO lines that run alongside National Grid infrastructure.
- Look at the options for pursuing shorter sections for the Peak District and Eryri National Parks.
- Consider whether it is feasible within the timescales to carry out extra studies on some of the broader benefits and opportunities that could arise from the schemes including, e.g. cultural heritage (this also links to the LEI – see section 3 below).
- Provide a refreshed view of the practicalities and ultimate feasibility of the Lake District scheme.

Actions:

- **Michelle Clark** – Circulate the emerging options reports and more detailed project engineering reports as they arise.
- **Camargue** – Convene an online meeting to discuss the outcomes from the above actions and any further progress on the shortlisted projects.

Session 2 – Updates on the schemes shortlisted for underground projects

Two of the five schemes that have been prioritised to date to be taken forward for undergrounding have now been completed. Steve Ellison, Amardeep Malhi and Robbie Griggs from National Grid gave updates on the three ongoing schemes that are currently in various stages of development. A summary of the progress for each of the three schemes is outlined below.

2.1 – Eryri (Snowdonia) National Park – 4ZC.1

The Eryri scheme involves the removal and relocation of approximately 3km of overhead line into a 3.5m segmentally lined tunnel under the Dwyrdd Estuary, and the installation of 12 400kV high voltage cables with a circuit length of approximately 4.2km. The tunnel will carry the connection from a new sealing end compound at Llandecwyn to the expanded and reconfigured existing cable sealing end at Garth near Minffordd, to join up with the existing cables that run under the Glaslyn Estuary to the northwest. Construction requirements also include two new tunnel headhouses (one at Minffordd and one at Llandecwyn) and a shunt reactor installation at Trawsfynydd 400kV substation.

Works at Garth have continued to focus on completing the laydown area, and preparations for bringing the tunnel boring equipment to site.

Progress at Llandecwyn has included extensions to the site offices, completion of pedestrian walkways for the workforce, diversion of the 11kV SPEN OHL away from the shaft area, and successful completion of the peat translocation works.

Secondary consents for the abstraction and discharge of water into the River Glaslyn and Dwyrdd Estuary have also been received, and a water monitoring well at Llandecwyn has been installed.

The re-manufacture/re-purposing of the Tunnel Boring Machine (TBM) is on target and the machine will be ready for shipping from Germany in February 2024, with arrival on site at Garth scheduled for later in 2024. Members of the Eryri project team recently visited the manufacturing site in Germany for the Factory Acceptance Test, and a number of photographs and videos of the TBM that were taken during this visit were shown. It was further noted that lessons learned from previous projects (in particular London Power Tunnels 2 and the River Humber crossing) have been fed into the design and manufacture of this TBM.

As reported at the last meeting, a TBM naming competition was held last year, with seven local schools taking part. There were 104 entries, and a shortlist of 10 was drawn up by the judging panel. The winning name was announced at the Community Liaison Group on 29th November 2023, and the name of the Eryri TBM is 'Buddug' (Welsh pronunciation 'biðig' or 'bith-thig'). The name itself comes from Boudica or Boudicca, known in Latin chronicles as Boadicea or Boudicea, and in Welsh as Buddug. Buddug was a queen of the ancient British Iceni tribe, who led an uprising against the conquering forces of the Roman Empire. The name means glorious, victorious and intelligent, and this was considered by the judging panel to be a great strapline for such an important project that will really benefit the area. In addition to an award for the winning entry, certificates were also awarded for the 10 shortlisted entries as well as to all of the schools that took part.

The comprehensive programme of community engagement activity continues. Recent events have included involvement in the Christmas lights switch-on in Penrhyndeudraeth, Key Stage 2 workshops in local schools, a presentation to ICE Wales, and a meeting with Llechi Cymru.

Upcoming activities include continuing to work with the Community Liaison Group, completion of the Project Information Centre with plans for talks and visits, activity around the TBM arrival and launch, a presentation to Friends of Borth y Gest, project team members taking part in the 2024 Llandecwyn 10k and 5k runs, further activity in local schools including work experience and Key Stage 3 workshops, participation in the National Eisteddfod of Wales 2024, and follow-up work/collaboration with Llech Cymru especially with regards to the Ffestiniog & West Highland Railway.

It was noted by the project manager that this degree of investment in community relations and stakeholder engagement is paying dividends. People are very supportive of the scheme, and the good relationships that have been fostered between the project team and the local community really have allowed the project to proceed well.

The indicative programme for the key stages of the project timeline remain largely unchanged:

- Shaft sinking – early 2024
- Project information centre complete – summer 2024
- TBM launch – late 2024
- Tunnelling complete – late 2025
- Cable insertion & termination – late 2025 to summer 2026
- Headhouse installation complete – summer 2026
- Sealing end compound install and termination – late 2028
- Pylon removal commences – mid 2029
- Project completion – end 2029

1.4 – North Wessex Downs National Landscape – YYM.1

The North Wessex Downs scheme focuses on a section of line near Devizes at Roundway Hill near the Millennium White Horse, and on the edge of a Civil War battlefield site. The project has widespread stakeholder and local support, and involves the undergrounding of approximately 4.6km of overhead line, with the removal of 13 pylons. The proposed cable route runs mainly across agricultural land, so from a construction and engineering route it is relatively straightforward. The project is expected to take two years to complete.

The planning application to Wiltshire Council was approved in July 2023, and Ofgem has indicated that it is minded to approve the funding of the project although the amount suggested fell below National Grid's budget estimates for the works. A number of stakeholders, members of the SAG and Chris Baines, on behalf of the SAG, wrote to Ofgem as part of its statutory consultation on the project pointing out the shortfall. National Grid is awaiting a decision from Ofgem based on this and its own feedback to the regulator.

The project team is currently in the process of mobilising on site. Vegetation clearance, which had to be done before the end of February due to the start of the bird nesting season, has been completed. Enabling works are well under way, including construction of the bell mouths and haul road. The next key stage is site establishment, with the aim of being operational from the second week of April.

As with the other VIP projects, there has been extensive investment in community liaison and engagement, and the project is very well supported locally. The first Community Liaison Group meeting took place in January 2024, and was extremely well attended. Planned activity over the next six months includes: establishment of the Project Information Centre; a series of drop-in events,

briefings and presentations; working with local news channels; newsletter/email update; and continuing to update the project website.

The main construction is due to commence in May 2024 including duct installation and construction of the sealing end compounds. The cables are due to arrive on site in September, and overhead line diversions will commence from October 2024. The indicative programme remains for construction, installation and commissioning of the cable route to be completed in 2026, followed by removal of the pylons and reinstatement.

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

This scheme was selected to be taken forwards as a RIIO-T2 project. The focus of the scheme is on the central section of a longer section of overhead line, which runs across the Cotswold Plateau from the west of Winchcombe in the north, to the east of Cheltenham in the south. The scheme would involve undergrounding approximately 7km of line and the removal of approximately 16 pylons. The scheme has widespread community and stakeholder support to date. The biggest challenges are around access, archaeology and topography.

The project is continuing to progress well and there is strong support from the community and local stakeholder groups. Work during 2023 focused on completing extensive surveys to determine the optimum underground corridor route, front-end engineering design, preparation for the planning application and other consents, and community engagement/consultation.

The corridor route has now been narrowed down. A number of changes have arisen as a result of the survey work and input from local stakeholder groups and landowners. This has included e.g. moving the route from the east to the west to avoid an area of mature trees in Breakheart plantation and instead routeing through an area where there is a lot of ash dieback. A couple of quick wins also arose from site visits, e.g. moving the corridor route just 10m to the east to avoid impacting an intersection of hedgerows.

It has taken nearly a year to identify a suitable location for access at the top of the plateau. The team initially looked at the shortest route, but options to the west and east would have impacted on the local population. The solution that has eventually been found is now to the south, where there is direct access from the A40, and the location is tucked away and screened.

It has been confirmed that planning permission is only needed for the sealing end compound and not the whole of the route, and it has also been confirmed that the project is not subject to EIA (Environmental Impact Assessment) screening. An overview of the content of the planning application documents is now available but was not covered during the meeting.

Archaeological investigations will start later this year and carry on into 2025. The ground-penetrating radar findings for the route have now been received, and a number of locations have been identified for further investigations. A local company called Cotswold Archaeology is working with the project team to investigate some of the findings, and they are also helping with the planning of where intrusive surveys/trenching will be carried out in order to help further inform the detailed route.

The draft Biodiversity Net Gain (BNG) report was completed in late 2023 and discussions are ongoing about how BNG targets will be met. The project team is working towards a target of a minimum of 10% BNG across the full cable route, and at the sealing end compounds there will be 20-30% BNG.

Stakeholder and community engagement activity since the last Stakeholder Advisory Group meeting has included:

- Meetings, presentations and briefings with Butterfly Conservation, the CEO and Director of Nature Recovery at Gloucestershire Wildlife Trust, the Cheltenham Borough Council Cabinet, and the Gloucestershire Local Access Forum.
- A online talk to the Cotswolds Rangers.
- A visit to the Cotswolds National Landscape by the National Landscape Association.

The project team will also be taking part once more in the Winchcombe Walking Festival which is taking place in May.

Feedback from the drop-in events that have taken place to date has been very positive. There is significant support for the scheme, and this has been accompanied by a lot of good questions about funding, value and project timescales, and it has been of note that there is an increasing level of interest in gaining more detailed information about the scheme. A lot of people are interested in the archaeology, and opportunities arising from the Community Grant Programme have been discussed.

The indicative programme remains largely unchanged. The planning submission and determination and the Ofgem submission and determination are due to take place in 2024, construction to commence in 2025/2026, and pylon removal and reinstatement to be completed in 2028-2029.

Session 3 – Update on the Landscape Enhancement Initiative (LEI)

Amardeep Malhi and Michelle Clark from National Grid gave an update on the Landscape Enhancement Initiative (LEI).

3.1 – Chair of the LEI Approvals Panel

Sue Sljivic has stood down as Chair of the LEI Approvals Panel and as the Landscape Institute representative on the SAG. A new Chair is therefore now needed. It was noted that whilst the last two Chairs have also been representatives of the Landscape Institute, membership of this body is not a requirement for the role, and anybody with the relevant skills, enthusiasm and availability is welcome to apply. National Grid will circulate more details of what is required, including the Terms of Reference for the Approvals Panel, and the workload/commitment required from the Chair.

3.2 – Mid-period review of VIP Policy, and proposed changes to the LEI policy

As part of the Ofgem licence there is a requirement to revisit the VIP and LEI policy at the mid-period of RIIO-T2. Following discussions at the last Stakeholder Advisory Group meeting, it was agreed that the following four revisions should be submitted to Ofgem for their consideration:

- Increase the individual project funding limit from £200k to £300k.
- Allow requests for in-flight 'top-ups' to adjust for inflation and other increases in costs.
- Reduce the matched funding element from 25% to 10%.
- Agree to fund the development costs of the application up to £10,000.

These proposals were submitted in December 2023, and Ofgem has advised that they will respond in March/April.

National Grid is hoping that the changes will not have to be consulted on by Ofgem. If consultation is required this will add another month to the process, and Stakeholder Advisory Group members may be asked to respond to the consultation.

3.3 – Project application updates

Five project applications were approved in Window 11. There was a good breadth of projects across the country with schemes in the Clwydian Range & Dee Valley National Landscape, Eryri National Park, North York Moors National Park, South Downs National Park and Blackdown Hills National Landscape.

Seven applications have been submitted in Window 12. These are now being reviewed and assessed by the landscape consultants in advance of the next meeting of the LEI Approvals Panel which will take place on 26th June 2024.

3.4 – Expansion of the scope of the LEI

As previously discussed, a working committee is currently reviewing the guidance for projects with archaeological aspects.

The potential to expand the scope of the LEI by including National Trails was also briefly discussed. Whilst this is not currently written into the policy, it could provide further opportunities in RIIO-T3 that are not currently covered by the existing provision. National Grid agreed that this could be looked at.

3.4 – Promotion of the LEI

Promotion of the LEI scheme is an ongoing topic of discussion/action. Promotional material that is in development includes case studies and other literature, crib sheets for events, as well as videos and testimonials.

There was a reminder that whilst LEI applications can only be submitted by National Park Authorities and National Landscape Partnerships, projects can be developed by other organisations/bodies. The key requirement is that there must be pylons within the setting of the proposed project. The LEI guidance states that:

The LEI scheme has been developed by National Grid to mitigate the impact of its infrastructure within protected landscapes (National Landscapes and National Parks), so projects within 3 km of National Grid owned overhead lines are eligible. However, site specific queries regarding this can be directed to the Landscape Advisors in order to ascertain specific eligibility.

3 km is only an approximate guide. The extent of project area is more importantly determined by the combination of extent of the identified landscape and visual effects from the National Grid infrastructure affecting the National Landscape or National Park.

It was also agreed that it would be useful if the LEI team could circulate a list of the authorities and partnerships that have not yet applied for funding under the LEI scheme, in order that Advisory Group members can think about who they could target.

Actions:

- **Michelle Clark / Amardeep Malhi / Camargue**– Circulate the LEI Approvals Panel Terms of Reference, plus details about the role and commitments of the Chair.
- **All** – Consider potential applicants for the role of Chair.

- **Michelle Clark / Amardeep Malhi / Camargue**– Circulate the list of National Parks and National Landscapes that have not yet applied for LEI funding.
 - **All** – Think about local properties, groups etc. that could be targeted regarding potential LEI projects.
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Session 4 – Discussion on National Grid’s Sustainability and Nature Consultation

National Grid is required to put in a funding request to Ofgem about its plans and aspirations regarding the ‘Nature Positive Approach’. Chris Plester from National Grid presented a high-level overview of National Grid’s Sustainability and Nature Consultation, with a view to seeking input from the VIP Stakeholder Advisory Group on the current thinking on Biodiversity Net Gain, and in particular members’ views on the scale of ambition and the extent to which the focus should be on quality of delivery as opposed to purely focusing on percentage targets.

The key points from Stakeholder Advisory Group members included:

- Commitment to a minimum BNG target is positive because achieving it is mandatory, but the aim should be to go above and beyond the minimum requirement.
- It is important to avoid getting to a place where a lot of easy to deliver gains are delivered in order to meet targets, instead of focusing on higher-quality outcomes that are more difficult to establish and challenging to deliver.
- There should be more focus on the broader opportunities that exist, as opposed to primarily focusing on achieving BNG with landowners that have National Grid assets on them. Specific examples included coastal communities, activities in the marine environment, and thinking about community benefits alongside ecological enhancement.
- The Nature Positive approach provides a great opportunity, particularly in landscapes where the gains could be enormous. It is, however, much more difficult to add value in places where there is already very little, so the challenge is how this scale of intervention can be used to reach parts of the country and landscape that are not currently being reached.
- This new approach also provides an opportunity to focus on schemes that weave together a number of different elements in order to achieve greater gain.
- The aspiration should therefore be to achieve a broader reach, with outcomes that have wider benefits, in addition to looking at achieving a level higher than the mandatory requirement that must be delivered.

It was suggested that it would be useful to revisit former project sites to consider where opportunities had been missed, including e.g. the Dorset VIP project site where the focus was primarily on restoration as opposed to restoration *and* enhancement.

There was some discussion around how National Grid manages its operational footprint, as well as its network and network commitments after infrastructure has been delivered. This discussion also broadened into the potential for looking more closely at the supply chain, and the options for working more closely as a collective sector to reduce the impact of the products that are being sourced and procured.

Overall there was agreement that the vision and aspiration should be about raising ambitions as to what can be achieved through focusing on quality, breadth and wider community benefits. There were a few suggestions as to how this level of ambition might be engendered, including e.g. providing examples of what has been delivered elsewhere, ‘statement pieces’, and third-party endorsements.

A brief discussion was held about the difficulties of measuring and reporting on outcomes. Concerns were expressed about the risk of percentage targets (whether mandatory minimum or voluntary additions) becoming purely about crunching numbers, and it was suggested that some of National Grid's partners could provide useful information about how they measure some of the broader and less tangible outcomes.

It was also suggested that it could be useful to embed people within organisations whose remit is to deliver at this kind of level, and that this would serve to address capacity issues.

Session 5 – Future meetings

The next VIP Stakeholder Advisory Group meeting will be held in **the autumn** and will be combined with a visit to a National Grid site.