

Stakeholder engagement from the North Wessex Downs options appraisal report

Having identified a shortlist of 12 subsections of line in eight designated areas using the landscape assessment, the Stakeholder Advisory Group asked National Grid to carry out early stage engagement with stakeholders and the public at a local level.

The aim of this early engagement was to gather information and intelligence on the areas to inform the options assessments and to gauge local attitudes and opinions on the work. It was also felt that involving local groups and individuals at the outset would not only help to identify any potential problems and challenges but also to give the local community a sense of ownership. It should be a requirement of any scheme taken forward to major engineering work that it has the support and involvement of local people.

It was also agreed at the Stakeholder Advisory Group that National Grid should work closely with the North Wessex Downs AONB to present a collaborative, inclusive partnership approach to the local community.

1. Stakeholder meeting

- 1.1. A meeting was held on 27 November 2014, attended by National Grid, Camargue and representatives from North Wessex Downs AONB (Andrew Lord) and New Forest National Park (Sarah Kelly). The following points were discussed and agreed during the meeting:
 - Stakeholder engagement would take place as soon as practical in the New Year.
 - Ideally engagement events would take place on the same day with a workshop for selected, relevant individuals / organisations followed by a drop in event for the public (afternoon and evening).
 - This initial stakeholder engagement would inform the landscape and technical work.
 - The workshop would be a closed session, focused on a smaller group and technical in nature. Attendees would comprise primarily key representatives from the AONB / National Park Authority and other key statutory bodies identified by the AONB Partnership / National Park Authority and agreed with National Grid.
 - Personal invites would be issued to the workshop. Personal invites would also be issued to the drop in sessions to selected groups / individuals (as advised by the AONB Partnership / NPA officers).
 - General invites would be sent to other relevant groups / local affected communities primarily using the AONB's and NPA's networks / databases. National Grid would work with the AONB's / NPA's communications officers to ensure that the message was delivered to relevant audiences.
 - Drop in events would need to take place at a convenient location for members of the community as advised by the AONB / NPA.
 - National Grid would take responsibility for organising and delivering the events but they would be collaborative activities between National Grid and the AONB / NPA teams.
 - Invites and materials for each event would be co-branded.

2. Engagement events

- 2.1. On the advice of the North Wessex Downs AONB team, the events were held as follows. Both workshop and drop in events took place on Tuesday 3rd March 2015. The workshop was held at the Bouverie Hall in Pewsey. The drop in event was held in the Pewsey Heritage Centre, also in the centre of Pewsey.
- 2.2. The workshop ran from 9.30am until 1.00pm and was attended by five representatives from local stakeholders including North Wessex Downs AONB officers and representatives from Wiltshire Council and the Pewsey Community Area Partnership. Representatives from National Grid, LUC and Camargue were in attendance and Mary O'Connor, Associate Director of WYG and member of the Landscape Institute, attended on behalf of the Stakeholder Advisory Group as an observer. Jill Smith, Communications and Events Manager for the National Association for AONBs also attended as an observer.
- 2.3. The drop in events ran from 2.00pm until 8.00pm and were staffed by representatives from National Grid (VIP project team) along with LUC and Camargue. They were attended by a broad cross section of the local community with a number of local landowners represented, as well as local residents. In total, 90 people attended the event.
- 2.4. The event was publicised as agreed with the AONB with direct invitations sent to the AONB's mailing list of key stakeholders. The event was also promoted via the AONB's e-newsletter, a news article on its website, a piece on its Facebook page and regular tweets through its Twitter profile. North Wessex Downs communications officer Rose Somerset was active in encouraging people to attend and used the local community network to circulate information about the event. National Grid worked closely with Rose and provided material for use in publicity proactively and on demand.
- 2.5. A press release was produced and issued to local media resulting in coverage in BBC News online, *Wiltshire Gazette and Herald*, *Marlborough News*, *Swindon Advertiser* and on BBC Radio Wiltshire – which interviewed Henry Oliver and National Grid's VIP project manager, Hector Pearson.

3. Stakeholder feedback

3.1. Technical workshop

The following key issues were discussed at the Technical Workshop:

3.1.2. *Landscape and visual*

- The North Wessex Downs AONB highlighted the gently rolling nature of the downland throughout the Vale of Pewsey and suggested that the pylons represented a harsh intrusion into this landscape.
- The extension of any work into the sections YYM5 or YYM6 would receive wide support locally were they to be considered as part of the solution (this was backed up at the public drop in) .
- YYM.4 sits between the A338 and A345. Taking the sealing end compounds (if undergrounding is the preferred option) outside the road boundaries would be a logical step – there is more opportunity to hide infrastructure here as the landscape changes.
- The worst affected locations are Easton Royal and Milton Lilbourne – the pylon line cuts between them.

- The AONB commented that the DNO line is less intrusive as the towers are lower / smaller and they sit closer to the downs. As a result the removal of the National Grid line would have significant positive impact on the area.
- The area is dominated by arable farmland in the Vale with rolling chalk downs on either side. A series of ancient, steep-sided paths (droves) used by drovers to move livestock run north – south through the Vale.
- Given the topography of the area and its very open nature, it would be very difficult to mitigate the impact of the line section by planting. For those using paths, the line crosses at right angles making clump planting as a solution ineffective.
- There are opportunities for positive impact in terms of planting post any work to reinstate plants such as orchids.

3.1.3. *Ecology and environment*

- It was suggested that although the area has considerable biodiversity, Natural England had told the AONB that they did not foresee any showstopping issues as far as biodiversity is concerned.
- The line sits within the zone of influence for an SSSI and the Hants Avon SAC – this would require appropriate assessment. However, although National Grid needs to be aware of the river, as it would not need to cross it (with undergrounding) it should be fine – as long as it is aware of the context of the chalk stream.
- The area around Manningford Bridge is very swampy and this swamp is associated with the Hants Avon SAC. There have been problems with run-off from the A345. The general swampy nature of the Avon in the area is challenging.
- Much of the area through which the line runs is arable farmland – although a major dairying area in the past, there is little or no dairying today.
- In terms of wildlife, the main issue is ground nesting birds such as stone curlew, lapwing, skylark and corn bunting. Most of the landowners already have agricultural agreements in place and aware of the issues relating to these species. Other species in the field and droves include turtle dove and tree sparrow. Brown hare are also found in the area.
- Farmland dominates but because the land has only relatively recently been turned over to arable there are unlikely to be and rare arable weeds. There are orchids in the green sides of the ancient droves.
- Burbage, Easton Royal and Grafton delineate the boundary of the ancient Savernake Forest Estate. It is unlikely that there are many ancient trees in the droves and surrounding the fields. Older trees are found on the clumps.
- There is gapping in the hedgerows where YYM.5 and YYM.6 run. There could be opportunities here for the Landscape Enhancement Initiative to come into play.

3.1.4. *Archaeology*

- As with biodiversity, initial soundings taken by the AONB suggested that archaeology would not be a showstopper for any work.
- The meeting advised that it would be worth contacting the following people to find out more about the local archaeology:

- Pewsey Heritage Museum – a source of local experts
 - Devizes Heritage Museum – David Dawson
 - Paul Bowerman of Pewsey Hill Farm
 - Wiltshire Archaeological and Natural History Society
 - Mark Depasse – farmer in Easton Royal
- It was pointed out that the NPPF is very strong on the setting of Ancient Monuments south of the line.
 - Fyfield Down has a long barrow field system and the remnants of a mediaeval village.
 - There is also an ancient field system at Milton Hill.

3.1.5. *Land ownership*

- Land ownership in the area is mainly family farms. The group advised on relevant local farmers who should be approached.
- The AONB also suggested that the firm, Black Sheep Consulting is approached as they have been advising local farmers on agri-environment agreements.
- The Farmers Club which meets every third Thursday of the month would be a useful point of contact.

3.1.6. *Public rights of way and access*

Technical issues

- The area is crossed by 12 paths and drovers' trails as follows:
 - 10x bridleways
 - 1x public footpath
 - 1x byway
- The White Horse Trail – which is being increasingly actively promoted by the AONB runs under the line section. A number of businesses offering accommodation and refreshments have sprung up along the trail.

3.1.7. *Tourism*

- A number of businesses offering accommodation and refreshments have sprung up along the White Horse Trail. Some of the farming businesses supplement their income with tourism related activity.
- The line is visible from the Kennet and Avon Canal which is a major tourist attraction in the area.
- The AONB is planning to boost visitor numbers to the area by actively promoting the White Horse Trail. There is an annual White Horse Walk in May / June which attracts large numbers of participants.
- The group felt that the work could have an eventual positive impact on tourism. There will be interest in the project while it is under construction and the AONB will work with National Grid to promote it.

3.2. Summary

- It was generally felt by the group that despite potential disruption, undergrounding would offer the best solution for the line section.
- T-pylons or lower height pylons would not do sufficient to lessen the impact. It was felt that although T-pylons might add an 'exotic' flavour to the landscape, it would contrast with the DNO line and the cumulative visual impact would be greater.
- If pylons are to remain, the group would prefer the lattice design as they had lived with it for so long.
- The AONB commented that the DNO line is less intrusive as the towers are lower / smaller and they sit closer to the downs. As a result the removal of the National Grid line would have significant positive impact on the area.
- Either side of the A roads (A338 and A345) would be the best potential places for sealing end compounds. The A roads would also be best for access as some of the B roads are very narrow and banked.
- With a significantly higher number of vehicle movements during construction a detailed transport plan would be produced as part of the planning application process. Routes through villages should be avoided where possible.

4. Public drop in session

23 feedback forms were received from a public-drop in session held in Pewsey on 3 March 2015.

Comments are summarised as follows:

- The written feedback received at this event was generally supportive of the VIP project.
- To reduce the visual impact of the pylons, the majority of the residents in Pewsey preferred undergrounding the cables. One resident would consider replacing the lattice towers with T-Pylons as an alternative.
- Most residents did not feel that the other options such as painting or screening the pylons, would help in minimising their visual impact.
- Three residents noted that the disruption during any major engineering works to bury the cables would be minimal, especially as the pylons are in the middle of flat arable land.
- For several residents, the removal of the pylons would enhance the tourism experience and "drastically improve the area" and ensure that the beautiful views of Pewsey would not be affected by an overhead line.
- A local community group, Pewsey Community Area Partnership, and the local tourism group, Pewsey Vale Tourism, voiced their support for the project and spoke in detail to the project team about the socio-economic benefits that the project would bring to the area.
- Four local people did feel that the project's provision could potentially be spent elsewhere. One resident within this group felt that the pylons in the valley and had little visual impact on the community.

- One resident raised concerns about the visual impact of a new sealing end compound on the landscape.
- The sealing end compounds were viewed as a “small price to pay” to have the line buried one resident noted in their feedback, and could be situated in a discrete area within the AONB.
- The District Network Operator (DNO) transmission line that runs alongside the National Grid line was highlighted as a concern in two feedback forms. These residents felt that the opportunity for the VIP project to improve the landscape through removing the pylons would be compromised as the DNO line would still be visible.
- Other anecdotal feedback included
 - A number of residents who highlighted both YYM.5 and YYM.2 as worthy of attention due to the perceived high visual impact of the line in these sections.
 - Some landowners expressed their concern at the prospect of the work – particularly as the DNO line would remain in place.