

Stakeholder engagement from the New Forest 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 New Forest National Park Authority 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 New Forest National Park (Sarah Kelly) and North Wessex Downs AONB (Andrew Lord).

1.2 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 will 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 Partnership / 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 Partnership / 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 New Forest National Park Authority team, the events were held as follows. Both workshop and drop in events took place on Thursday 5th March 2015. The workshop was held at the National Park Authority's HQ in Lyndhurst. The drop in event was held in Hale Village Hall, close to the location of the shortlisted line.
- 2.2. The workshop ran from 9.30am until 1.00pm and was attended by 12 representatives from local stakeholders including New Forest NPA officers and representatives from Hampshire County Council, the appointed New Forest Verderers, the Forestry Commission, National Trust and Natural England. Representatives from National Grid, LUC and Camargue were in attendance and Dr Ingrid Samuel, Historic Environments Director of the National Trust attended on behalf of the Stakeholder Advisory Group as an observer.
- 2.3. The drop in events ran from 2.00pm until 8.00pm and was staffed by representatives from National Grid (VIP project team) along with LUC and Camargue. It was attended by a broad cross section of the local community with some local landowners represented, as well as local residents. In total, 115 people attended the event.
- 2.4. The event was publicised as agreed with the National Park with direct invitations sent to the National Park's mailing list of key stakeholders. The event was also promoted via the National Park's e-newsletter, an e-poster on its website, a piece on its Facebook page and regular Tweets by its communications officer. The National Park's Landscape Officer Sarah Kelly was also active in encouraging people to attend via word of mouth. National Grid worked closely with the National Park's communications officer and provided material for use in publicity proactively and on demand.

A press release was produced and issued to local media resulting in coverage in the *Southern Daily Echo* and *Bournemouth Echo*.

3. Stakeholder feedback

3.1. Technical workshop

The following key issues were discussed at the Technical Workshop:

3.1.1. Overview

- The key stakeholder present had met before the workshop and circulated a list of questions arising to National Grid. These questions were all addressed during the meeting.
- The stakeholder group made it clear that they welcomed being on the shortlist and wanted to work closely with each other and with National Grid to find a potential workable solution for the shortlisted section of line.
- A number of stakeholders including the National Park Authority highlighted the complex hydrology of the area and the need to maintain soil profiles after any work is completed (this may cause issues if an undergrounding solution is proposed).
- The Verderers made clear that the New Forest Act requires them to have a regard to the amenity of the New Forest as well as the flora and fauna. Grazing and the ability for livestock to get from one part of the New Forest to another unhindered is extremely important.
- The site is particularly wet- although some stakeholders believe that it should be wetter – and the creating of a wayleave across the site may prove challenging.

- The group felt that the quality of heathland in the area around the shortlisted line was not the best and work on the transmission infrastructure could create an opportunity to improve its overall quality.
- Sensitive undergrounding was considered to be the most desirable approach although this would need to be carefully monitored and a long-term restoration plan put in place.

3.1.2. *Landscape and visual*

- To improve the quality and authenticity of the heathland, stakeholders (and in particular the National Trust) expressed a desire to take away some of the trees in the commercial plantation areas. They felt that there was an opportunity to regain heathland by reducing commercial forestry.
- It was pointed out that the Forestry Commission intends to remove the trees in the south of the plantation in the near future.
- Tree planting to shield pylons doesn't achieve much in an open area of heathland such as this.

3.1.2. *Ecology and environment*

- The complex hydrology of the area was considered to be the biggest issue in ecological and environmental terms – see section below. In the western part under consideration it is very wet and the soil profiles are also very complex. Maintaining the soil profiles after any work would be a challenge.
- There is a raft of designations in the area under consideration including SACs, SPAs and SSSIs. This will have an impact on any methodology used.
- There are a number of protected species found in the dry part of the heat including adder and Dartford warbler.
- The implication of heat from the underground cables on the soil, water and the ecology would need careful consideration. The ecosystems are finely balanced and a slight increase in temperature below the surface could upset a delicate equilibrium.
- There is a large amount of grazing in the open access areas and this would need to be maintained. The Verderers are required by the New Forest Act to have regard to amenity, flora and fauna. The Verderers would like to see an undergrounding solution but are aware of the many issues.
- Concerns were raised over a water pipe project across the heathland. The pipe had been laid some 40 years ago but the area above it had remained grassed over and had not returned to its original heathland state.
- A full Environmental Impact Assessment would be required to cover the work 'cradle to grave' as it would take some years to restore the heathland if it is disturbed for, say, undergrounding.
- Concerns were raised by the group over the need to excavate the cable for maintenance. How frequent would this be and how disruptive?

3.1.3. *Hydrology*

- Stakeholders outlined the heathland vision for the New Forest which is linked closely with the complex hydrology of the area.
- Evidence from other sites and other work suggests that there can be problems with seepage areas, the backfilling of mires and ducting taking water away from an area that should be wet.
- A full hydrological survey would be required. It was suggested that National Grid gathers evidence from other sites to inform its proposals and should look at the temporary – as well as long term – impact on vegetation and associated ecology linked to the hydrology.
- Stakeholders commented that it is essential to cross a water course rather than run parallel to it with any undergrounding / ducting work.
- Heat from the cables would be an issue as a slight temperature differential can have a major impact on vegetation.
- Change in vegetation and hydrology could also affect grazing.
- Some stakeholders suggested the possibility of taking advantage of any National Grid work to ‘bung’ the area up and make it wetter. This could improve the quality of the heathland in the area significantly.
- The National Park is currently involved in a stream / mire restoration programme. Works associated with VIP could be an opportunity here rather than a threat – digging up soil could be beneficial.
- Some stakeholders suggested looking for an underground route on drier land to make access easier. Possibly consider a route to the north, the west and then south to rejoin the line. This would enable the project team to stay on relatively dry land.

3.1.4. *Archaeology*

- A full geophysical survey would be required in the area. The archaeologists were not worried about excavation and would keep a watching brief on progress with regular site visits.
- There are a number of scheduled ancient monuments and important sites at Jacob’s Barrow and Golden Cross. There is Bronze Age, Iron Age and Roman archaeology in the area and the potential for discovery could be very exciting.
- LIDAR surveys were requested and the New Forest NPA confirmed that it has access to LIDAR surveys of the area and will check its license agreement to see if they can be shared with National Grid.
- A pack of information was highly relevant and useful supplied by the New Forest NPA’s archaeologist.
- The Turf Hill area was also used for ordnance testing during WWII – the bouncing bomb was tested here. There is the possibility of discovering unexploded ordnance.
- The MoD at Latchmore has ground radar surveys of the area which may prove useful.

- It was also suggested that National Grid speak to Anthony Passmore – a former Verderer and active local archaeologist on the area in question as he knows it extremely well and is highly knowledgeable on its archaeology.

3.1.5 *Land ownership*

- The vast majority of the site is open access land owned and / or managed by the National Trust and the Forestry Commission.
- Stricklands Plantation is under multiple ownership at the western end of the shortlisted line and at its eastern end the Hamptworth Estate – which includes the landfill site – is up for sale.
- There are other smaller landowners along the B3080.
- The Longford Estate is a major landowner in the area with landholdings on either side of the Avon.

3.1.5. *Public rights of way and access*

Technical issues

- The Avon Valley Path is a National Trail that runs through the area crossing under the adjacent section of line near the village of Woodgreen.
- There are a number of other footpaths from Hale House and in Stricklands Plantation.
- The majority of the area under consideration is open access land.
- Stakeholders suggested contacting Sam Jones, Hampshire CC's rights of way officer.

3.1.6. *Tourism and socio-economic impacts*

- The area is very busy during the summer months with tourist traffic in the area and passing through to go south.
- Traffic movements from the landfill site are an issue at present and a highways management plan would be required to support any work / planning application.
- The meeting suggested contacting Tim Lawton at Hampshire County Council's Highways Department.
- The area is currently used more by local people than visitors – any work could be an opportunity to encourage more visitors to the area.
- It would be sensible to engage with the owners of Sandyballs holiday centre
- The meeting suggested contacting the following for more on tourism:
 - Anthony Climpson at New Forest District Council
 - Andrew Bateman at Hampshire County Council
 - Mark Holroyd at New Forest NPA

3.1.7. *Discussion on possible solutions*

- The stakeholders at the meeting favoured an undergrounding solution but were aware of the challenges – specifically in relation to hydrology and its impact on ecology.

- Problems with cabling on the recent Navitus Bay scheme were raised.
- The group considered potential locations for the sealing end compounds. East of the B3080, the landfill site was mentioned as an option. At the eastern end of the line, a location in the water company site was suggested or in the general location of Stricklands Plantation.
- Re-routeing was discussed but it was agreed that it would have to go a long distance to avoid the National Park boundary to the North.
- If undergrounding was an option, the group asked if it was possible to look at an alternative to a 50m swathe across the heathland. The potential for directionally drilling in linked 1km stages was raised and National Grid will investigate the feasibility of this.

4. Feedback from drop-in event

Over 37 feedback forms were completed at the New Forest event. Comments are summarised below.

- 26 respondents were strongly in favour of the burying the cables underground. Although in favour, many provided useful feedback and information on areas of concern, the key points of which are highlighted below.
- Four respondents objected to any visual impact mitigation.
- Two respondents stressed the importance of catering to the ponies' needs should a project be taken forward in the New Forest.
- Four of the respondents felt that the wrong section of line (4YB.2) had been shortlisted. Many of those attending the drop in were from the village of Woodgreen and felt strongly that the section to the west (4YB.1) should have been shortlisted.
- Three respondents were concerned about the level of disruption and potential damage that would be caused should the section on line be buried underground.
- Respondents felt that proposals to re-route the line would be met with a high level of local opposition.
- The disruption of wildlife habitats was a central issue for ten respondents with the destruction of the nightjars' nesting sites a key concern.
- The potential effect that the project could have on the heathland is a major cause for concern three of the respondents who have called for extensive environmental assessment and mitigation due to the unique characteristics of the heathland landscape.
- The T-Pylon design was viewed negatively by the two respondents who commented on it. It was felt that pylon replacement would be 'tinkering' with the problem as opposed to solving it.
- Camouflaging or screening the pylons was not considered a viable option by respondents due to the open nature of the landscape.
- Two respondents felt that it was important to engage with the verderers and the commoners should the project within the New Forest be taken forward as their views on the grazing land must be taken into account.

- Two respondents cited the installation of a water pipe across the Hale Purlieu as an example of why the project should not be taken forward. Local residents believe that the environmental impact of that project is still being felt today and that the landscape has never recovered.
- Three local residents highlighted the fact that the pylons across Hale Purlieu are heavily used as a landmark by people walking and riding and that the removal of the pylons could cause a problem for these users.
- One respondent felt that the assessment was incomplete and that the views from the A338 should have been taken into account. In his opinion, these views are accessible to a larger number of people than those within the Forest and are therefore of higher value.