

Stakeholder engagement from the Brecon Beacons 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 as closely as possible with the Brecon Beacons National Park Authority to present a collaborative, inclusive partnership approach to the local community.

1. Stakeholder meeting

1.1 A meeting was held on 2 December 2014, attended by National Grid, Camargue and representatives from the Brecon Beacons National Park (Julian Atkins) and Snowdonia National Park (Jonathan Cawley). 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 National Park Authority and other key statutory bodies identified by the 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 National Park Authority officers).
- General invites would be sent to other relevant groups / local affected communities primarily using the Park Authorities' networks / databases. National Grid would work with the Park Authorities' 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 National Park Authorities.
- National Grid would take responsibility for organising and delivering the events but they would be where possible collaborative activities between National Grid and the Park Authority teams.

2. Engagement events

- 2.1. On the advice of the Brecon Beacons National Park team, the events were held as follows. Both workshop and drop in events took place on Wednesday 28th January 2015. The workshop was held at the Angel Hotel in Abergavenny. The drop in event was held in the King's Arms also in the centre of Abergavenny.
- 2.2. The workshop ran from 9.30am until 1.00pm and was attended by eight representatives from local stakeholders including Brecon Beacons National Park Authority officers and representatives from Natural Resources Wales. Representatives of Costain, the appointed contractor for the Welsh Government led project to dual a section of the A465 Heads of the Valleys road just outside Abergavenny, were also present. Representatives from National Grid, Gillespies and Camargue were in attendance and Jonathan Cawley, Director of Planning and Cultural Heritage at Snowdonia National Park was present on behalf of the Stakeholder Advisory Group as an observer.
- 2.3. The drop in event ran from 2.00pm until 8.00pm and was staffed by representatives from National Grid (VIP project team) along with Gillespies and Camargue. It was attended by a broad cross section of the local community with a number of local landowners represented, as well as local residents. In total, 15 people attended the event.
- 2.4. The event was publicised through direct invitations sent to the National Park's mailing list of key stakeholders. Brecon Beacons National Park's Director of Countryside and Land Management, Julian Atkins advised National Grid which individuals and groups to invite to the event. The King's Arms posted information about the event on their Facebook page and put up posters in the venue. National Grid provided material for use in publicity proactively and on demand.
- 2.5. A press release was produced and issued to local media in Wales. S4C, the Welsh language channel, arranged to come to the public event and conducted an interview with Jonathan Cawley. On the day of the event, they cancelled their scheduled interview due to unforeseen circumstances.

3. Stakeholder feedback

3.1. Technical workshop

The following key issues were discussed at the Technical Workshop:

3.1.1 *Overview of the area*

- Line (4YU.3) crosses the dramatic and historic Clydach Gorge at the southern end of the National Park.
- The gorge is visually dramatic and has a long and rich industrial heritage. The area has also been shaped by this and the major transport corridor (A465 Heads of the Valleys road) that runs east west through it.
- There are a large number of scheduled ancient monuments in the area as well as old tramways and lime kilns.
- Part of the subsection runs within the Blaenavon World Heritage Site and feeds into the River Usk Special Area of Conservation (SAC). There are significant bat populations in the extensive caves that exist below the surface of the gorge.

- Given its industrial past there are a number of communities which have grown up around the Clydach Gorge. These are characterised by linear terraced housing.
- It was pointed out that other sections of line adjacent to the shortlisted subsection are frequently cited locally for their intrusive visual impact. [NB – these will have scored less highly in the Landscape and Visual Impact Assessment due to their proximity (they run in parallel) to an existing dual carriageway trunk road (A465).

3.1.2. *Landscape and visual impact*

- The high level of landscape and visual impact (particularly on the communities established there) was acknowledged by the group and it was agreed that removing the electricity infrastructure would have a positive impact as the pylons detract from the heritage of the location.
- The BBNPA stated that it has a 'Strategy for landscape' document which sets out a broad approach for any development which should be considered as part of the VIP project.
- However, the historic industrial heritage of the area was acknowledged and considered important with lime kilns, a tramway and quarries all critical in shaping the area that exists today.
- Given the many constraints on the site (geology, archaeology, ecology – see below). A number of workshop attendees felt that undergrounding along the current path would not be the most appropriate option. However, they felt undergrounding elsewhere (specifically along the A465) or that re-routeing the route could be considered.
- Attendees reiterated the importance of considering the full visual impact of the location of the sealing ends of any proposed underground route.

3.1.3. *A465 dualling*

- All parties discussed the A465 road dualling scheme and the potential opportunity that this could present to underground cables beneath the road.
- Workshop attendees confirmed that EIA work has already been undertaken as part of this highways project.
- Costain reported that the section of the A465 in question roughly corresponded to the shortlisted subsection of National Grid line (meaning that the geographical match was good).
- Timing is critical. The A465 subsection has been through a Public Inquiry and is now at the detailed design stage.
- Engineers from all sides would need to discuss potential solutions. Welsh Government's input would also need to be sought to determine whether a solution might be possible utilising the corridor created by the road excavations.
- Due consideration would need to be given by both sets of engineers to the provision of ventilation and venting for heat dissipation and of the potential for ducting and / or splitting circuits into smaller binders.

3.1.4. *Archaeology and cultural heritage*

- NRW reported that it has identified 15 landmarks within the National Park. The Clydach Gorge is a dramatic landscape feature in the National Park and it is a rich industrial heritage and home to scheduled ancient monuments.
- The 'Forgotten Landscapes' project is restoration project at the Blaenavon World Heritage Site. The tram routes and lime kilns in the area are part of the industrial historical story. The first phase of the project was completed last year and Torfaen Council are now looking to carry out a second phase. A series of trails throughout the gorge are going to be promoted by BB NPA on the back of the A465 road works project once it is complete.
- The south eastern side of the Clydach Gorge also sits in what is being proposed as a buffer zone to the Blaenavon World Heritage Site.
- The shortlisted pylon line also runs close to the Monmouthshire and Brecon Canal.
- Reference was made to a number of candidate sites within the area that are currently under consideration by Cadw for scheduling as ancient monuments.
- The general consensus was that unless the A465 alignment was an option, the complex and rich archaeology of the area would make undergrounding along the existing route extremely difficult and unwelcome. An alternative route would need to be considered.

3.1.5. *Environment, ecology and geology*

- The River Clydach runs through the area and feeds into the River Usk which is an SAC.
- The Clydach Gorge itself has a significant series of cave systems beneath it and is an important habitat for bats particularly the lesser horseshoe bat.
- There is woodland of European importance on the south side of the gorge and the north side is a special area of conservation.
- Any underground route could potentially run to the north side of the gorge towards Gilwern, but attendees felt that this would be technically challenging because of the slope, lack of soil and geology.
- South of Brynmawr, there are significant populations of lapwing.
- As with the archaeology, the consensus among attendees were that the presence of an extensive cave network, difficult geology and poor soil conditions would make undergrounding along the existing route extremely difficult and it would be better to consider an alternative alignment.

3.1.6. *Land ownership*

- There is a rich ownership pattern with large swathes of manorial land where no-one knows the owner. There is also a significant amount of common land in the area and the Chairs of the various associations would need to be consulted on access and potential options.
- Higher land is more likely to belong to an estate – the Duke of Beaufort's estate owns the highest part of the Clydach Gorge.
- Within the gorge itself, the land is generally farmland with fairly low productivity because of the poor soil and rich archaeology. There are numerous small farms with different owners.

- Monmouthshire County Council also has a significant landholding in the area.

3.1.7. *Tourism*

- There is major push to promote the area to cyclists. The Sustrans cycle network was discussed and attendees felt that the routes running through the Clydach Gorge area (NCR 46 and NCR 492) is already well screened from the pylons.
- There is an ambition within Welsh Government to extend the Monmouthshire and Brecon Canal as part of the Cwmbran and Newport regeneration scheme. The canal itself is the single most popular tourist attraction in the area.
- A series of trails throughout the Clydach Gorge are being developed as part of the Forgotten Landscapes Partnership (linked to the World Heritage Site) These will be publicised by BB NPA on the back of the A465 road works project once it is complete.
- The A465 is the gateway to the Brecon Beacons National Park and many people are more familiar with the pylon line that runs adjacent to the A465 dual carriageway as it leaves Abergavenny. This section did not score highly in the landscape and visual assessment, largely due to its proximity to the existing trunk road.

3.1.8. *Socio- economic / community impacts*

- The shortlisted section of line has a significant visual impact on the communities and farms within the Clydach Gorge.
- Although the Clydach Gorge is important many members of the public locally will be equally concerned about the eastern and western ends of the National Grid transmission line – particularly where it runs parallel to the A465 trunk road running west out of Abergavenny.
- The work on the A465 is being linked to educational and other local initiatives. Should the project go ahead within the Brecon Beacons, the NPA and others would like to see similar levels of input to local education and heritage initiatives.

3.2. *Summary*

- Stakeholders present were positive in their views and agreed that the removal of the shortlisted line would bring social as well as landscape and visual improvements.
- However, the group did not feel that undergrounding along the existing route would be possible due to a large number of constraints including rich industrial archaeology, geology, ecology and environmental concerns.
- The favoured option among attendees was for a undergrounding solution that followed the line of the A465 Heads of the Valley road which is currently being dualled. An alternative option would be to re-route the existing line possibly using alternative pylon design such as T-Pylon.
- The Group also expressed considerable interest in the Landscape Enhancement Initiative. Comments were made that it would be relatively easy to screen the infrastructure along the Usk Valley but much harder as the line runs towards Llangattock.

4. **Public drop in session**

- 4.1 Five feedback forms were received from the public-drop in session held in Abergavenny Comments are summarised as follows:

- The members of the public who attended the event were interested in the VIP project and discussed the project at length with members of the VIP team.
- The written feedback received was predominantly provided by residents from a village outside Abergavenny called Govilon. This small settlement is situated in the Usk Valley.
- Govilon residents felt that the section of line running along the A465 was visually more intrusive than the line identified in the VIP project landscape and visual assessment.
- One Govilon resident said that for visitors entering the Brecon Beacons National Park from the west of Abergavenny – seen unofficially as the ‘gateway to the National Park’ – the five pylons running within the Usk Valley had the biggest visual impact on the landscape. This resident felt that the pylons were more visually intrusive in the landscape as the valley is flat.
- According to a member of the public, the pylons highlighted by the Govilon residents will be visible from the proposed flyover on the A465.
- Most of the attendees felt the Brecon Beacons National Park and the wider area would benefit if the shortlisted section of line was taken forward as one of the selected projects for major engineering works.
- It was noticeable that no residents from the village of Clydach attended the drop in. This was probably due to the location of the event (in Abergavenny) and the relatively low publicity levels that this event received when compared with some of the others. It is therefore recommended that any future engagement should take place in locations closer to some of the settlements most affected by the existing line.