

Stakeholder engagement from the High Weald 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 High Weald AONB Partnership 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 High Weald AONB (Sally Marsh) and Dorset AONB (Richard Brown).

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 Partnerships and other key statutory bodies identified by the AONB Partnerships 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 officers).
- General invites would be sent to other relevant groups / local affected communities primarily using the AONBs' networks / databases. National Grid would work with the AONBs' 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 Partnerships.
- National Grid would take responsibility for organising and delivering the events but they would be collaborative activities between National Grid and the AONB teams.
- Invites and materials for each event would be co-branded.

2. Engagement events

- 2.1. On the advice of the High Weald AONB team, the events were held as follows. Both the workshop and the drop in event took place on Tuesday 24th February 2015. The workshop was held at English Heritage's offices at Battle Abbey. The drop in event was held in the centre of Battle, in the St Valery Room in Battle Memorial Hall – a venue close to Battle Abbey.
- 2.2. The workshop ran from 9.30am until 1.00pm and was attended by 12 representatives from local stakeholders including High Weald AONB officers and representatives from East Sussex County Council, Rother District Council, Battle Town Council, Natural England, English Heritage and Sussex Ramblers. Representatives from National Grid, Land Use Consultants and Camargue were in attendance and Neil Sinden, Policy & Campaigns Director at CPRE attended 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 Land Use Consultants 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, 28 people attended the event.
- 2.4. The event was publicised as agreed with the AONB with direct invitations sent to the AONB mailing list of key stakeholders. The event was also promoted via the AONB's e-newsletter, an e-poster on its website and tweets by its communications officer. High Weald AONB Co-director, Sally Marsh and her team were also active in encouraging people to attend via word of mouth. National Grid worked closely with the partnership'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 a radio interview on BBC Sussex with 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:

3.1.1. *Landscape and visual*

- The High Weald AONB emphasised the small-scale nature of the landscape dotted with ancient woodland, grassland containing many protected species and intricate water systems that have remained undisturbed over many centuries. If this mosaic of secluded and special places was disturbed then it would be almost impossible to restore.
- English Heritage emphasised the historic importance of Battle Abbey and the designated site of the Battle of Hastings. Over a quarter of a million visitors a year visit the site and soon the gatehouse will be open to the public affording panoramic views across the area. The pylons are clearly visible from the Abbey (especially from the gatehouse tower) and the battlefield site.
- It was also pointed out that the landscape has been shaped by power generation with wood grown to create charcoal for fuel and as a fuel in itself.

3.2.2. *Ecology / environment*

- It was reported that the area is crossed with a mosaic of ancient woodland, ghylls (small steep-sided ravines) and unspoilt grassland.
- These areas are small in scale and contain many protected species including the Hay Scented Buckler fern and other ferns and bryophytes.
- The area under investigation is a groundwater source protected area and further investigation would be needed on the impact of any work.
- Part of the line runs through the RSPB reserve at Fore Wood. Further discussion would be needed with the RSPB as both landowner and because the reserve contains many ghylls in the sandstone that support rare ferns and a range of flowering plant, butterfly and bird species.
- The SNCI also needs more study and a more detailed look at the biodiversity of the area.
- The removal of transmission lines could disturb feeding and breeding due to noise and unfamiliar events
- There was concern from the AONB and others that the ecological impact made during construction could be unacceptable due to its impact on ecosystems and the small-scale features of the landscape.

3.2.3. *Archaeology*

- It was the view of the archaeologists present that the archaeology of the area – although potentially important – is not a showstopper for the project. Work on a recent road scheme has highlighted what there is below ground and the insights have been valuable from an archaeological perspective.
- However, not much is known of the archaeology of the area in question – it has been undisturbed for centuries and a significant amount of desk research would be required. Topographical data would also be needed to create an accurate 3-D model.
- LIDAR surveys were also recommended and Forest Research were mentioned as an organisation that has developed techniques for modelling through the canopy of ancient woodland.
- There was a recommendation that desk work was used to identify the least significant sites in the area.
- Local archaeologists cautioned that the landscape mitigation costs as a result of any intrusive works would be very high – possibly too high. A figure of at least £5m was quoted.

3.2.4. *Land ownership*

- There is multiple land ownership along the route of the line with most of the pylons located on land belonging to different owners.
- Around 15-20 small farmsteads and residential properties all under private ownership dominate the area.
- The RSPB reserve at Fore Wood falls within the section of line which passes through the extreme northern part of the reserve.

- Crowhurst Park (a holiday caravan park) lies close to the line.

3.2.5. *Tourism*

- The area receives large numbers of visitors each year and there are a significant number of local businesses that rely on tourism for their main income.
- Crowhurst Park (a holiday park for caravans) is located very close to the section of line.
- Traffic volumes in the area are also very high in the tourist season and there is already significant pressure on local roads.
- Great care would need to be taken in the planning phases of the work on how to mitigate the impact on local tourism businesses and on the road network.
- Battle Abbey and the Battle of Hastings site is one of English Heritage's most visited sites (¼ million visitors per annum) and there are plans to improve the visitor experience by opening up the gatehouse tower which would open up panoramic views over the area – the pylons would be visible from here.

3.2.6. *Public rights of way and access*

- The line of pylons is visible from a large number of public rights of way and footpaths. There is no open access land.
- A number of footpaths run south from Telham Lane directly under the line – these offer the worst views of the infrastructure.
- Footpaths towards Ninfield also pass under the line but the impact is less as they are on slightly lower ground.
- The worst point is south of Millers Farm in Powdermill Lane. South of Peppering Eye Farm the pylon is visually and physically intrusive as the path has to deviate around the leg of the pylon.
- The Bexhill link part of 1066 Country National Trail also passes underneath the shortlisted line.
- Concerns about the intrusive nature of construction work – and particularly undergrounding were made on numerous occasions during the workshop. There were genuine concerns about irreparably damaging ancient woodland, grassland and ghylls which has been undisturbed for centuries and is home to many rare species.
- The group were open to the suggestion that lower height pylons and careful – but significant – planting might provide an alternative solution to undergrounding. Changing the insulators from glass to porcelain would also help to reduce the visual impact of the towers against the woodland.
- English Heritage pointed out that even with lower height pylons the line would still be visible above the tree line in some places.
- T-pylons were not dismissed but there was concern that as they were replacing something that had been there for 40-50 years, they might create more visual impact.

- The possibility of re-routeing to the south (possibly outside the AONB) was also discussed. However, it was acknowledged that this had the potential to upset people living near to the new proposed route and that CPO powers might be needed.
- In such as small-scale landscape there was concern as to where sealing end compounds would be located (if undergrounding was pursued) and where compounds would be located during construction.
- It was agreed that National Grid should consider three options. Undergrounding all or part of the line (possibly including some directional drilling in ancient woodland areas), lower height pylons and planting and re-routeing to the south with lower height towers – the latter could serve to bring the line lower down the hill side and reducing its impact on views from Battle Abbey.

4. Public drop in session

4.1. Five feedback forms were completed at the High Weald event. Comments are summarised below.

- Three respondents commented that the pylons were an ‘eyesore’ on the landscape.
- The majority of those giving feedback stated that undergrounding of cables would be the preferred option.
- One respondent was against the undergrounding of cables as they believed that local people are now used to the pylons.
- One member of the public stated that they believed that the section of line near Battle has relatively low visual impact and that reducing the height of the pylons would be the best solution.
- The negative effect of a project to put cables underground on the landscape was highlighted as one of the respondents felt that it would have a detrimental impact on the woodland landscape.
- Although not captured in the feedback forms, at least two landowners who visited the drop in session said that they were used to the pylons and did not want the disruption of having them removed by whatever means. In addition, some landowners who welcomed undergrounding would not be happy with a lower height pylon solution as it represents significant disruption with minimal long-term benefit for them.