

VIP Stakeholder Advisory Group
Notes of the twenty-second meeting held on 12th May 2023

Stakeholder Advisory Group members present:

- **Chair** Chris Baines
- **Campaign for National Parks** Ruth Bradshaw, Policy and Research Manager
[present on day one, dialled in day two]
- **CPRE** Tom Fyans, Director of Campaigns and Policy
- **Landscape Institute** Sue Sljivic, Chartered Member of the Landscape Institute
- **National Association of AONBs** Howard Sutcliffe, AONB Manager, Clwydian Range and Dee Valley AONB
- **National Grid** Director of New Infrastructure, Electricity Transmission
- **National Parks England** Sarah Kelly, Landscape Officer, New Forest National Park Authority
- **National Parks Wales** Jonathan Cawley, Director of Planning and Land Management, Snowdonia National Park [dialled in]
- **National Trust** Dr Ingrid Samuel, Historic Environment Director
- **Natural England** Mike Burke, Programme Director – Sustainable Development [dialled in day two]
- **Ramblers** Stephen Russell, Policy and Advocacy Officer [dialled in day two]

Secretariat in attendance:

- **National Grid** – Michelle Clark, VIP Project Manager; Tim Hewish, Strategic External Affairs Manager; Paul Hamnett, Senior Project Manager – Dorset; Steve Ellison, Senior Project Manager – Eryri [dialled in]; Robbie Griggs, Lead Project Manager – Cotswolds; Ben Smith, VIP LEI Project Manager
- Professor Carys Swanwick, Independent Landscape Advisor to National Grid
- **Camargue** – Stuart Fox; Jane Dalton

Guests:

- Andy Parsons, CEO, Cotswolds National Landscape
- Carl Trowell, President UK Strategic Infrastructure, National Grid
- Mike Elmer, Programme Director, East Coast (HVDC), National Grid
- Jonathon Porritt, Founder Director, Forum for the Future [dinner only]

Apologies:

- Keith Davies, Natural Resources Wales
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On 11th May, the Stakeholder Advisory Group carried out a project site visit to Cotswolds National Landscape (line section ZF.2(B)) and received a presentation from Andy Parsons, the CEO of Cotswold National Landscape.

Robbie Griggs, Lead Project Manager on the Cotswolds VIP project gave an update on project progress and provided context for the site visit. The Cotswolds VIP project will see the removal of up

to 18 pylons and around 7km of overhead line predominantly across the Cotswold Plateau east of Cheltenham in Gloucestershire.

To date, initial survey work, site walkovers and front-end engineering design have led to the emergence of a preferred route. This route has been shared with the Stakeholder Reference Group and some stakeholders with a wider programme of public information activity and consultation with the community, stakeholders and landowners planned for the summer. Survey work is also continuing with ecology and archaeology being major considerations.

Access to the site from the south (A40) has proved particularly challenging but the team has identified an access point from a layby on the A40 which would provide good direct access from the road and a strong location for the main site compound which would be well screened. Early discussions with Gloucestershire Highways look promising for this location.

The current programme will see further design and development work continuing alongside the public and stakeholder engagement with the aim of submitting both the planning applications for the sealing end compounds (to Tewkesbury Borough Council in the north and Cotswold District Council in the south) and the Ofgem funding submission in the first part of 2024. The project will be screened for EIA later in 2023. The tender event for the main contractor will also be held in 2024.

Construction work would begin in earnest in 2026 following on from the archaeology in 2024/25. The first pylons are due for removal in 2028 with the project concluding in 2029.

After the site visit, Michelle Clark, VIP Project Manager, gave a short presentation on the next price control period which begins in 2026. Ofgem has not yet published firm timelines but based on RIIO-T2, the programme will begin in 2023 with consultation. For National Grid to make a first submission in July 2024, the SAG will need to establish a list of projects no later than the end of 2023 so that we can undertake detailed scoping and create programmes and phased cost estimates.

These will then be considered as part of the overall investment plan; it was noted that there is a challenge in coordinating major undergrounding projects with other major infrastructure projects and asset replacement.

The SAG was reminded that in 2019 (for our RIIO-T2 submission), the Group agreed that the practical limit was to develop two or three projects at any one time at the same time as delivering two or three projects – depending on the project sizes. In 2026, we will be delivering Eryri, North Wessex Downs and, hopefully, starting the delivery of the Cotswolds project. There is also a further constraint in the number of specialist transmission contractors available and willing to tender for such work. Also, it is unlikely timescales can be compressed because these projects are – by definition – in some of the most sensitive and protected landscapes in England & Wales.

A way forward was proposed by National Grid whereby for the next SAG meeting, it would revisit the project information on the priority routes (remaining purple and red projects from the original landscape assessment). The Group should also consider where there were any new route segments that need assessing [none were forthcoming]. At the 23rd SAG meeting, the Group would need to decide on the next routes to prioritise and the ambition on LEI for the next price control period. National Grid would then undertake willingness to pay research, review the findings with the SAG and ensure that the Group's priorities aligned with the first submission.

This course of action was agreed by the SAG.

The purpose of the meeting on 12th May was for the Stakeholder Advisory Group to:

- Hear updates on the four other schemes prioritised for replacing existing overhead lines with underground cables in Areas of Outstanding Natural Beauty (AONBs) and National Parks in England and Wales.
 - Receive an update on the Landscape Enhancement Initiative (LEI).
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Session 1 – Updates on the schemes shortlisted for underground projects

Paul Hamnett, Steve Ellison and Ben Smith from National Grid gave updates on the progress of the schemes that have been prioritised to be taken forward for undergrounding. A summary of the progress and specific issues for each of the schemes is outlined below.

1.1 – Dorset AONB – 4YA.7

The Dorset scheme is the first of the VIP projects to have reached completion. The project lasted four years and involved the removal and undergrounding of 8.8km of overhead line. The last tower came down in October 2022, and 22 pylons have now been permanently removed from the Dorset landscape.

The last few months of the project have focused on the final project elements including removal of the bellmouth and main site compound on the A35 and reinstatement works. Due to delays over the winter, the last area to be reinstated has been the site entrance. The project is due to complete on schedule in May 2023, and a community event is planned at Martinstown Village Hall for 24th May 2023.

The Stakeholder Advisory Group were shown before and after photographs of the project site from three key viewpoints, demonstrating the impact on the landscape of the removal of the pylons. Progress with reinstatement was also demonstrated through a series of photographs from different viewpoints showing what the project site looked like during construction and what it looks like now. These included images of the major earthworks at Cut/Fill Sections 6 and 7, the reinstated grassland at Ridgeway and Corton Ridge, and the progress with reinstatement and screening around the Northern sealing end compound, the site entrance, and the drainage hotspots at Combe Road / Mr Barber's Track.

The scheme is considered by local stakeholders to have been a major success which has created a great legacy for the area. In addition to the landscape and visual enhancement following the removal of the pylons, other benefits have included:

- Retention of the bell mouth at the northern end of the site (north of the A35) – a construction feature that local farmers and landowners wanted to retain and which the planners have agreed to.
- A number of local projects have been funded through the Community Grant Programme, including grants awarded most recently to Martinstown Village Hall, Dorchester RIOT Running Club, Langton Herring Village Hall and the National Trust for works at the Hardy Monument.
- Positive media coverage and significant and positive community engagement.

The project has also received company-wide recognition, including two internal awards, and recognition that – alongside other VIP schemes – a new benchmark has been set for community engagement and reinstatement ambitions. As Dorset was the first of the VIP schemes, there was no set target for Biodiversity Net Gain (BNG), so although a lot has been achieved it has not been formally measured. The approach to this has changed for subsequent schemes.

The project manager reiterated how much he has enjoyed working on this project, and that the learning from this project will be taken into both the North Wessex Downs and Cotswolds National Landscape schemes.

1.2 – Peak District National Park (eastern section – 4ZO.2)

The Peak District scheme has also nearly reached completion. The project has involved the undergrounding of 1.5km of overhead line under the Trans Pennine Trail (TPT), the removal of the existing sealing end compound in Dunford Bridge, and the construction of a new sealing end compound in Wogden Foot local wildlife site (a former railyard). The last tower came down in October 2022, and seven pylons have now been permanently removed from the Peak District landscape.

As advised at the last Stakeholder Advisory Group meeting, the TPT has been fully reinstated, and the temporary TPT diversion has been removed. Works in the last few months have focused on completing the agreed car park enhancements, which have included the addition of marked parking bays, an improved surface, a dedicated horse trailer area with mounting blocks, a new bus shelter, a linking route between the car park and the local pub and reinstatement of the picnic area. The mosaic commemorating the Tour de France was retained and has also now been reinstated.

The Stakeholder Advisory Group were shown a number of images demonstrating progress with all of the above, as well as photographs of link pillars on the TPT, a school group attending a site visit organised by the project team in partnership with the Yorkshire Wildlife Trust, and the first user of the newly reinstated TPT.

There has been very positive feedback from local stakeholders and trail users, and the local authority is citing the project as an example of how developers should operate. There is, however, some disappointment that the temporary TPT diversion was not able to be retained.

Whilst the Peak District scheme is relatively small in comparison to some of the other VIP projects, it is considered to have punched above its weight in terms of how it will affect future schemes.

Biodiversity Net Gain was measured for this scheme, and both within National Grid and externally, the achievement of 18% BNG against a target of 10% is considered to be one of the project's major successes. The achievement came about through a combination of on-site works at Wogden Foot and off-site works at Crow Edge, with specific examples including: the retention of 40% of trees that were originally permitted for removal; additional and enhanced habitat for the Willow Tit as well as other species; the protection of an area of special grassland during construction; and the off-site planting of native 6,000 new trees. The scale of achievement has been attributed to the enthusiasm within the National Grid / Morgan Sindall project team working alongside the Yorkshire Wildlife Trust, and it is hoped that this will pave the way in setting the standard for future schemes.

The Community Grant Fund has not been drawn on as well as the project team would have liked, but three grants were awarded to the local cricket club, a sailing club and Tandem Trekkers, a charity which organises described cycling trips in the Peak District for those with visual impairments.

The project is now due to reach completion in May 2023. A celebratory community event is being planned for June at the Dog and Partridge in Flouch, as well as a ribbon-cutting event to officially open the trail.

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

The Eryri scheme involves the removal and relocation of 3.3km of overhead line into a 3.5m segmentally lined tunnel under the Dwyryd 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 Minffordd (Garth), to join up with the existing cables that run under the Glaslyn Estuary to the northwest. Construction requirements also include two new tunnel headhouses, and a shunt reactor installation at Trawsfynydd 400kV substation.

Work during 2022 primarily focused on preparing for construction to commence in 2023. The construction sites and site offices at Garth and Llandecwyn are currently being established ready for major construction to commence in July 2023. The detailed design of the tunnel is also ongoing, including Ground Investigation works to inform construction requirements for third-party crossings, and changes to the tunnel shaft design which will allow for safer and more efficient launching and operation of the tunnel boring machine (TBM).

Under current timescales, the TBM will be delivered to site and ready to be launched at Garth in April 2024. The tunnelling is scheduled to be completed by mid-2025. Cable insertion and termination, and tunnel head house construction should be completed by summer 2026, after which reinstatement works will commence. There is then some float in the programme to allow for any problems with the tunnel. Project completion is currently on track for the end of 2029. The opportunity to complete the works any earlier depends primarily on progress with the TBM/tunnel.

The Stakeholder Advisory Group were presented with a number of pictures, diagrams and photographs (including some images from the live cameras at site) showing e.g. the progress of the site establishment at Garth, key features of the Garth site set up, design plans for the head house structures and tunnel shaft infrastructure at Garth and Llandecwyn, the key features and different segments of the TBM, and some of the most significant aspects impacting the detailed design of the tunnel.

The TBM that will be used for this project is currently in Germany where it is being remanufactured/repurposed from an existing machine. The cost of this machine is slightly cheaper than procuring a new one, but the major positive news is the sustainability aspect.

A TBM naming competition will be held with local schools - the result announced in the autumn.

One of the key aspects of the planning for this project was engaging with the local community to set up a Local Workforce Strategy. Key elements of the strategy include:

- Contributing to skills development by:
 - Providing training & mentoring for local supply chain partners
 - Setting up a Supply Chain Sustainability School
 - Exploring how to get workforce and supply chain into the local area to enable them to take part in the project
 - Setting up schools / colleges / universities programmes
- Working with the main contractor Hochtief on promoting inclusion & diversity as part of the local strategy
- Respecting Welsh culture & heritage, including e.g., Welsh lessons for the project team and dual language signage
- Using a small local organisation who are doing all the local mobilisation work etc.
- Active promotion of jobs via social media, websites, Jobcentre Plus, etc.
- Organising a contractor and meet the buyer day

There are already a number of people from the local workforce on the project, meaning that the proportion of Welsh speakers on the team is high. Whilst Hochtief UK has recruited tunnel experts from Germany and across Europe and National Grid has brought in people with experience from the Feeder 9 Humber project, local designers and engineers are also involved.

With regards to community relations, a huge amount of effort has been invested right from the start of the project in making sure that local people are aware of what is going on and have been given the opportunity to ask questions, contribute and provide feedback. A key success of this approach has been evidenced in there being very few calls to the local hotline in comparison to other projects. This has highlighted the importance and value of early engagement and providing clear, comprehensive and focused messaging/information to the local community.

Additionally, the National Grid project team is enthusiastic about its role in the community and the local environment. As part of this, team members have already carried out a beach clean, taken part in the Llandecwyn 10k hill race, given a presentation to and carried out a site visit for the National Parks Societies, and volunteered with the Cymdeithas Eryri (Snowdonia Society) and the local Woodland Trust. The team intends to continue to build on these community relationships, and other community engagement activities have included ongoing meetings with the Community Liaison Group, town and community council meetings and setting up a schools' programme.

Compared to other VIP projects, the people of Wales became involved with the Community Grant Programme from very early on. Projects that have been funded to date include football pitch repairs for Porthmadog Juniors FC, landscape-based events and activities organised by Cymdeithas Eryri, a Covid memorial garden overlooking the estuary organised by the Holy Trinity Church and renovations to the memorial hall in Penrhyndeudraeth.

1.4 – North Wessex Downs AONB – YYM.1

The North Wessex Downs scheme focuses on a section of line north of Devizes at Roundway Hill near the Millennium White Horse and on the edge of a Civil War battlefield site (the Battle of Roundway Down). The project involves the undergrounding of approximately 4.5km of overhead line, and 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 a minimum of two years; it is anticipated that there will be archaeological challenges, so this is being factored into the project timeline. Following on from the successes in Dorset, the project team hopes that the West Wiltshire Young Archaeologist Group and Wiltshire Museum in Devizes will become involved.

The planning application to Wiltshire Council and the funding submission to Ofgem have both now been submitted, with responses expected later in the year. The indicative programme is for the archaeological works to commence in 2023 and construction to commence in 2024.

With regards to community engagement, there is widespread local support for the scheme. The project team is repeating a pylon walk during the June 2023 North Wessex Downs Walking Festival, and the first Community Liaison Group is planned for late 2023. Discussions have also taken place about STEM schemes in local schools/colleges.

Session 2 – Update on the Landscape Enhancement Initiative (LEI)

Ben Smith from National Grid gave an update on progress with the LEI.

2.1 – Project application updates

Window 11 opened in January 2023 and, following the March 2023 Approvals Panel meeting, five of the applicants that had submitted Expressions of Interest were invited to submit full applications. These applications include a good spread across different organisations, including some that have not made the most of the scheme to date.

A brief discussion was held about the project in the Lake District that involves restoration of the roof of a privately-owned building. It was emphasised that this kind of project is not about developing for profit and is purely about the landscape, and within the LEI policy there are strict criteria and limitations about what can and cannot be done. This particular project is very specifically related to the landscape and visual impact of pylons in the area, and there was a lot of debate as well as legal input about whether it could be funded through the LEI before it was approved. It was acknowledged that this project has pushed the boundaries of what can be considered under the LEI scheme, but now that this test case has gone through the process it may be something that can be considered in other areas. [See also 2.2 below.]

The next window for Expressions of Interest will open on 20th June 2023.

2.2 – Proposed revisions to the LEI Policy Document

The LEI Approvals Panel met on 23rd March 2023 and discussed key elements of the LEI policy. The discussion was prompted by feedback from organisations delivering LEI projects and reflected on the current economic situation and the impact of Brexit, Covid and the war in Ukraine. As a result, some changes to the LEI terms and policy have been put forward for consideration by the Stakeholder Advisory Group. A note had been circulated prior to the meeting, summarising the recommended changes.

From Window 12 onwards:

- **Recommendation 1** – Increase the limit per individual application from £200k to £300k, with a maximum amount of £900k per annum per applicant. Funding will continue to be limited to 75% of the total costs of each project.
- **Recommendation 2** – The contingency allowance to be reduced from 15% back down to 10%, with applicants reminded to include inflation.
- **Recommendation 3** – The addition of a Buildings Policy, with a specific inclusion that a building cannot be made residential with 10 years of the grant being awarded. [NB The Buildings Policy is in draft and still requires legal sign-off.]
- **Recommendation 4** – Interpretation boards to now be allowed for funding, and National Grid's name to now be allowed to be included. [Neither of these were previously allowed.]

For existing projects:

- **Recommendation 5** – To allow uplifts in funding for existing 'in-flight' projects. This recommendation has arisen due to increases in costs impacting projects that are already under way but that are no longer feasible to be delivered with the funding that has been agreed. It was noted that the LEI Panel have been getting feedback that funding uplifts are already being catered for in the wider landscape, and e.g., the National Lottery Fund have already implemented a similar policy. Existing projects would be able to request an uplift so

long as they can evidence/justify the need, and the process would involve the completion of a relatively simple form.

The discussions that followed focused on the following key aspects:

- **Recommendation 1** – Views on the 75% total costs provision with 25% match funding were mixed. Some members said that it is not major issue for their organisations, but others advised that there have been comments from fellow organisations about the fact that other grant-funding bodies do provide 100% funding (specifically Farming in Protected Landscapes (FIPL) and the Woodland Trust). The LEI team reiterated that volunteer time is included within the match funding, however this is rarely used, and it was further noted that lots of organisations do not keep track of volunteer time. It was agreed that the LEI Panel would review the 75% provision at their next meeting.
- **Recommendation 2** – There was a discussion about how to ensure that inflation is taken into account by applicants in order to reduce the number of requests for in-flight uplifts. Whilst it was emphasised that applicants are already clearly encouraged to account for inflation within their applications, some members expressed concerns that even the larger/better-resourced organisations can find this kind of financial modelling very challenging, and there may therefore be a need for further mechanisms to support applicants with this part of the application process. The additional and ongoing difficulties that have previously been discussed around the gap between submitting an application, gaining project approval, and receiving project funding, are likely to make modelling for inflation even more challenging. There were a few suggestions about the kind of support that could be provided e.g., the LEI team could analyse which suppliers/materials are being most adversely impacted by inflation in order to provide example inflation models, and examples/case studies from some of the recent projects that have had to adjust for inflation could also be provided.
- **Recommendation 3** – The need to exercise caution with regards to the Buildings Policy was highlighted, with concerns being expressed about the potential for a snowball effect once people realise that buildings renovations can be funded if the terms of what is and is not allowed are not ‘sealed down’. It was emphasised that the Buildings Policy stipulates very clearly that any proposals must relate back to the assessment of the visual impact of pylons in the area. It was further reiterated that the Panel was very hard on this criterion with the project that has just been invited to be taken forward to a full application.
- **Recommendation 4** – It was broadly agreed that it is completely right for National Grid and the LEI to be credited alongside other contributing organisations. Some concerns were however expressed about the content, location and number of interpretation boards that might be given approval, especially as there are several groups/people who are vociferously against littering the landscape with interpretation boards. It was reiterated that the LEI Panel is not involved in making these kinds of decisions, and that the AONBs and National Park authorities should be trusted with this. It was however acknowledged that there needs to some care around this issue.

Following the discussion, Stakeholder Advisory Group agreed that they were happy for the recommendations to be taken forwards, subject to further consideration of the issues that were raised during these discussions. The LEI Panel will review the recommendations again at their next meeting.

2.3 – Project site visit – Clwydian Range & Dee Valley AONB

A site visit has taken place to an LEI project in the Horseshow Pass which is one of the main routes into Eryri (Snowdonia). Chris Baines, Zac Richardson, Michelle Clark and Ben Smith attended the visit and were presented with an award by the Clwydian Range and Dee Valley AONB Partnership. The Stakeholder Advisory Group were shown a number of pictures from the project which has involved farmers and local contractors being funded to work together on ancient trees and hedgerows. The two farmers are also fantastic ambassadors for the LEI scheme due to their broader connections through part-time work for the National Trust and their role as the local Curlew Officer.

2.4 – Encouraging further applications

Further applications are continuing to be encouraged through e.g., continued networking, letters being sent out, and further involvement in the annual AONB conference which is taking place in September in Bath. The LEI team is also keeping track of which of the organisations have and have not yet applied.

Consideration around how it might be made possible to provide further support and/or funding for the development of projects is still ongoing, with conversations continuing to take place with other grant makers, the LEI grant awarding officer and Gillespies, etc.

Session 3 – Future meetings

The next Stakeholder Advisory Group meeting will be arranged during September/October 2023 at a central location.

The next site visit is likely to be in the first half of 2024 to the Eryri (Snowdonia) project, ideally coinciding with the launch of the TBM.